



# Dutch Culture in the Golden Age

J. L. PRICE



# DUTCH CULTURE IN THE GOLDEN AGE





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# Contents

Preface	7
I Context	9
2 Structures and Change	43
3 The Shape of Dutch Culture	84
4 Painting and Graphic Art	103
5 Literature	138
6 Humanism and the Republic of Letters	154
7 Science and Technology	166
8 God and Truth	185
9 The Culture of Politics	201
10 The Influence of the Dutch Golden Age	215
11 The Waning of the Golden Age	244

REFERENCES	263
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SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY	271
---------------------	-----

PHOTO ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	277
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INDEX	279
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# Preface

My interest in Dutch history was first awakened by the Dutch seventeenth-century paintings in the National Gallery which I visited frequently on Sundays while I was a student in London. I was intrigued by what I then saw as the sharp contrast in both subject matter and style between these paintings (together with some sixteenth-century Flemish art) and the art of the Renaissance, Mannerism and Baroque in nearby rooms of the gallery. *Culture and Society in the Dutch Republic during the Seventeenth Century*, published in 1974, was an attempt to understand the society which had produced such distinctive art. While most of my published work since has been on the political and social history of the Dutch Republic, I have never lost my fascination for the culture of the Dutch Golden Age, and I believe that sufficient time has passed since my first attempt to justify another visit to this important but in some ways enigmatic moment in the history of Western culture.

The present book is an extended essay rather than a detailed study, and attempts to suggest the peculiar flavour of the culture of the Dutch Republic during its period of greatness, economic and political as well as cultural, in the seventeenth century. My debt to the work of other scholars is immense, and pioneering work in a number of areas has appeared in the last three decades. Much light has been cast on many previously obscure aspects of the Dutch Golden Age, while a more sympathetic reading of the eighteenth century has helped to put the preceding century in a rather different perspective. The work of art historians, especially in iconography, has also been invaluable, though I have my reservations about the more extreme conclusions that have been drawn from their explorations. Similarly fascinating studies have appeared on the way men

and women viewed and understood the world around them, and some at least of these are included in the Select Bibliography. Such works have helped me to reach what I hope is a better understanding of the period, though I am more conscious now of what I do not know than was my younger self. There is one significant omission in this essay: I regret that I have said nothing about music despite its important role in Dutch life. The explanation for this is that I know and understand too little to venture into this area, but I urge readers to add a sound track of metrical psalms and sea shanties to this book, to remember that many fly-sheets were intended to be sung to well-known tunes, and that music was part of the entertainment in the smarter brothels of Amsterdam towards the end of the century, besides being a necessary accomplishment for young ladies in more elevated social circles.

Finally I take this opportunity to redeem a promise I made some years ago to a remarkable Special Subject group. So this is for Anna Baldwin, Emma Bergin, Victoria Crawley, Robin Danby, Victoria Frodsham, Jennifer Gray, Marie Lamont, and Mark Stow – and also for Diva, sorely missed.

# I

## Context

The cultural achievements of the Dutch Golden Age were extraordinary by any standards, but their context makes these achievements particularly intriguing, perhaps unlikely, and certainly unpredictable. Even the political turmoil and social upheavals which produced the Dutch state may also help to explain why its culture should have turned out to be so distinctive. The Dutch Republic was born in the course of the Revolt of the Netherlands in the late sixteenth century and the subsequent Eighty Years War for independence from rule by Spain. However, the new state which emerged from this struggle was the unplanned result of what might be seen as its relative failure – Spanish military strength brought the south of the Habsburg Netherlands back to obedience, leaving only a rather disparate group of provinces in the north to continue the struggle and achieve independence. Against all expectation this ill-assorted group of allies not only halted the Spanish advance but by 1609 had effectively created a new state, though one which both contemporaries and later historians have considered rather unusual if not bizarre in many respects.

There was nothing inevitable about the emergence of the Dutch state and certainly its eventual borders were far from pre-determined. The separation of the southern provinces from the northern was largely a result of war, and of the Spanish army's ability to reconquer much of the south. Also, while the general shape of the new state was more or less established by the beginning of the seventeenth century, its definitive boundaries were uncertain until the final peace with Spain in 1648. The Dutch Republic had no natural geographical boundaries – apart from the sea. In the east the frontier followed the line which had separated the Habsburg Netherlands from the

neighbouring regions of the Holy Roman Empire on the eve of the Revolt, and this had been fixed by accidents of political history rather than by any natural barriers. Indeed, the northern Netherlands remained at least nominally a part of the empire until 1648. In the south the divide between the Republic and the Spanish Netherlands was in the end determined by military actions, with the Dutch state eventually managing to hold onto a strip of Flanders and the northern part of Brabant. There were also no very compelling historical links uniting the seven northern provinces which came to compose the core of the new state. Indeed, the eastern provinces had only been brought into the Habsburg Netherlands in the course of the early sixteenth century, Gelderland a bare twenty years before the outbreak of the Revolt. There was no pre-existing Dutch nation on which a state could be built, despite the assertions of later nationalist historians; rather the Dutch nation was the creation of the Dutch state – and it took over two hundred years for a sense of national identity to prevail over provincial loyalties. There was, of course, a range of common elements which would prove sufficient in the long run to provide the foundations of a sense of a common identity for these rather disparate provinces. They had more or less a common language, though again standard Dutch was a seventeenth-century creation and the Fries language was also common in the northernmost regions, and all were clearly part of a broader Netherlands' cultural area. However, it should be remembered that, on the eve of the Revolt, Holland and Zeeland were probably closer culturally to Flanders and Brabant than they were to the eastern provinces of the future Republic. Similarly, the sharp economic and social disparities between the most advanced provinces – Holland in particular – and the rest were already becoming apparent before the Revolt, though they were not yet as marked as they were to become in the course of the seventeenth century.

The new state was never planned but arose out of the vicissitudes of the Revolt. For many years the ostensible aim of the rebels was to force political and religious concessions from the Spanish, and when this failed they sought to place themselves under one foreign ruler or another. Only when first Henri III of France turned them down and then the alliance with England (Treaty of Nonsuch, 1585) and the consequent governor-generalship of the earl of

Leicester proved to be a near disaster were the Dutch prepared finally to try to survive as a totally independent state. That the Republic not only survived but developed rapidly into one of the major powers of Europe probably surprised the Dutch as much as it did foreign contemporaries. This success was all the more unexpected as the political system holding the Republic together was not on the face of it very promising. The seven provinces which made up the Dutch Republic – Holland, Zeeland, Utrecht, Friesland, Gelderland, Overijssel and Groningen – each maintained a considerable degree of autonomy, and the Union of Utrecht of 1579, which was the nearest thing the new state had to a constitution, was more an alliance between equals than a firm foundation for a new polity. The States General, consisting of delegations from the seven provinces, each with a single vote, was the highest political authority but, as unanimity was required for its decisions to be valid on important matters, it often seemed as though sovereignty lay at provincial level rather than at the centre. In an age of monarchical centralization in Europe, the size and scope of central government in the Dutch Republic remained extremely limited – foreign policy and diplomacy, army and navy, and little more. Co-operation between the provinces was not helped by their marked differences in population size, economic development and political priorities. Most important was the contrast between Holland and the other provinces: by the middle of the seventeenth century Holland accounted for around 40 per cent of the population of the Republic and over 60 per cent of its wealth, and both its economic and political interests were often at odds with those of most of the other provinces. The differences between the provinces, together with the need for unanimity for decisions in the States General, seemed to be a recipe for political impotence, but this apparent weakness turned out in practice to be the key to effective government. Although Holland, in common with the other provinces, had only one vote, this gave it a formal veto, and its wealth made that veto decisive in practice. It provided just under 60 per cent of the expenditure of the state and so, as it could not be compelled to pay for any policy it had not agreed to, effective action by the States General was dependent on Holland's approval. The result was that Holland dominated the politics of the new state from the very start, particularly in

regard to foreign policy, while the other provinces went along with this because the principle of provincial autonomy allowed them to run their internal affairs as they wished.

There was a further complication to the political system as the presence of the princes of Orange (who took their title from the nominally independent principality of Orange in the Rhône valley in France) disturbed this apparently neat pattern, and this could be regarded as either a weakness or a strength. William of Orange ('the Silent') had been the most inspiring leader of the Revolt until his assassination in 1584, and his descendants continued to play a powerful role in the politics of the Dutch Republic throughout the seventeenth century. Their political influence was based on being governor (*stadhouder*) of most of the provinces, including Holland, and captain-general of the army, together with a certain degree of charisma emanating from their princely status and their descent from the Father of the Fatherland. Stadhouders were appointed by the States, the representative assemblies of the various provinces, but nevertheless wielded certain quasi-sovereign rights which gave them considerable political power within their provinces, while their position as heads of the army strengthened their political influence particularly in wartime, as well as being a source of enormous patronage. This combination of offices and prestige made the princes of Orange a viable alternative to the States of Holland as the political leaders of the Republic, and power oscillated between these two poles of political authority throughout the seventeenth century. Up to 1618, Holland under the guidance of the *Advocaat van den Lande*, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, was dominant politically. Then leadership moved to the princes of Orange after the coup by Maurits in 1618, who was followed by his half-brother, Frederik Hendrik, and then by the latter's son Willem II. However, Willem died young in 1650, opening the way for renewed dominance by Holland under the *raadpensionaris* (grand pensionary), Johan de Witt, in the so-called First Stadhouderless Period. The French invasion of 1672 brought an end to De Witt's dominance and opened the way for Willem III, who led the Republic for the rest of the century. These changes of regime were accompanied by a certain amount of violence, notably in 1672, but this can be considered mild by the standards of the time. Indeed it can be said that despite

its shaky start and the apparently unpromising nature of its political system, the Dutch Republic proved in practice to be one of the most stable polities of a troubled century in Europe.

The Dutch Republic needed a relatively efficient political system to survive, for it emerged into a hostile world. The struggle to achieve independence from Spain lasted until 1648, with only a brief respite during the truce of 1609–21. However, it had already become apparent by the first decades of the seventeenth century that the Republic was to be a significant force in European politics, despite its uncertain international status and internal fragility. In fact it can be argued that the status of the Dutch state as a major power was always somewhat uncertain and depended to a considerable extent on the temporary weaknesses of its enemies and potential rivals. In the 1590s the Dutch were able to match the Spanish army of Flanders, but this was in no small part because much of the Spanish effort was diverted to France until 1598. However, by 1609 they had fought the Spanish to a standstill, and by that very fact proved they were a force to be reckoned with in Europe. In the later stages of the Eighty Years War, despite initial setbacks after the resumption of hostilities in 1621, the Dutch were eventually able to force Spain to recognize their full independence at the Treaty of Münster in 1648. By this point the Dutch Republic was clearly not only one of the leading countries in Europe, but also a power on a world scale. The Eighty Years War had also had a global dimension: the Dutch had fought Spanish and Portuguese forces in the East Indies and the Americas as well as in the Low Countries, and at its conclusion they had laid down the foundations of a major colonial empire in Indonesia and established strongholds and factories throughout the East. Dutch strength around the middle of the seventeenth century, however, was in part a function of the weaknesses of others. Both England and France were distracted by internal problems – the aftermath of civil war and regicide in England and the Fronde in France – while Spain continued to grapple with Catalan and Portuguese rebels, and Germany was exhausted after three decades of warfare on its soil. Soon after the mid-century, however, it became clear that the end of the war with Spain had not solved all the Republic's international problems. First they were attacked by the bellicose republican regime in England, and then a

decade later the restored English monarchy did the same. However, as the events of 1672 made clear, the real danger to the Republic came from the France of Louis XIV. The Anglo-Dutch wars (1652–4; 1665–7; 1672–4) were largely fought at sea and so were no threat to Dutch territorial integrity, though they were a deliberate challenge to the Republic's chief source of strength, its trading prosperity. In contrast, the French invasion in 1672, with its troops sweeping almost unopposed through the eastern provinces and into the heart of the Republic, seemed a threat to its very existence. In the event the French armies were halted at the borders of Holland and the nightmare faded, but it was never forgotten and for the rest of the century – and indeed until the second decade of the eighteenth century – the trauma of 1672 continued to dominate Dutch foreign policy. It seemed that the France of Louis XIV threatened not just Dutch interests but the Republic's survival as an independent state. However, the dilemma for the Dutch was that the cost of leading the resistance to France was a strain on the economy and thus on the prosperity that was the basis of Dutch political and military power. In the event, Dutch public finances never fully recovered from the enormous expenditure required by successive wars against France and, quite soon after the apparent triumph represented by the treaty of Utrecht (1712), the Republic slipped quietly into the role of a second-rate power in Europe. Perhaps there was always something a little artificial about the Dutch Republic as a major power: its rivals and potential rivals were much larger in terms of both population and land, and its only real advantage was its economic success – and even this was perhaps less firmly based than appeared at the time.

The Dutch Golden Age was not simply the creation of a booming economy, but it was certainly inextricably marked by it. It is not only the sheer wealth of Dutch society that needs to be taken into consideration when trying to understand the causes and nature of its cultural achievements, but also the social and cultural turmoil that necessarily accompanied such very rapid economic growth. The Dutch economy was the most powerful in Europe in the seventeenth century, and a combination of its wealth and entrepreneurial skills also led to the creation of a formidable trading empire on a global scale. While the beginning of the great economic boom



can be traced back to the 1590s,<sup>1</sup> this take-off was only possible because of the very sound economic base which had been built up much earlier. Holland was the powerhouse of a period of long-term economic growth and change in the northern Netherlands which stretched from around 1500 until at least the middle of the seventeenth century. The foundations of Dutch economic success were Holland's domination of trade with the Baltic, especially in grain, its control of the North Sea herring fisheries and its market-oriented agriculture, and all these elements were already well developed before the Revolt. The other regions of the northern Netherlands were to some extent drawn along in Holland's wake, but also suffered from its economic dominance. The eastern provinces in particular fared less well than the maritime region, not only because of the problem of living in the shadow of Holland, but also because they were more directly affected by military action throughout the Eighty Years War. In the earlier sixteenth century the land provinces had shown a similar economic vitality to that of the maritime provinces but after the outbreak of the Revolt their economy stagnated at best until the middle of the seventeenth century. This marked economic and thus social contrast between Holland (and to a lesser extent the maritime region as a whole) and the rest of the Republic should never be forgotten when trying to understand what has sometimes been called the enigmatic nature of the Dutch Golden Age.<sup>2</sup>

The long period of economic growth was interrupted by the first decades of the Revolt but continued with even more vigour from the 1590s onwards to produce what has been described as the first modern economy.<sup>3</sup> Whether it was truly modern or not, it was unquestionably a powerhouse of pre-industrial capitalism, with the influence of the market penetrating to every level of the economy and transforming Dutch society. The most visible sign for contemporaries of this commercial success was the Dutch merchant fleet, which seemed to be active everywhere and gave the impression of being considerably larger than it in fact was. The 'mother commerce' was the trade in Baltic grain: shipping bread grains, predominantly rye, from the ports of the eastern Baltic to Amsterdam to be stored and then sold on to buyers outside the Republic. This proved to be a sound basis for the development of a Dutch entrepôt, importing

goods from all over Europe and then re-exporting them. The development of the Dutch sea-borne empire<sup>4</sup> added Indonesian spices and other colonial commodities to the mix and further strengthened the Dutch market. The entrepôt centred on Amsterdam, which took over from Antwerp as the most important trading centre in northern Europe, and which in addition developed into its major financial market.

However, as important as commerce was to the Dutch economy, it is arguable that the developments in the agricultural sector were even more fundamental to its economic and social transformation.<sup>5</sup> The rising population of Europe in the sixteenth century led to a general rise in food prices that, besides giving a powerful boost to the Baltic grain trade, encouraged the development of a thoroughly market-oriented farming sector in the maritime region of the northern Netherlands. In essence this meant a move away from subsistence agriculture and an increase in specialization in order to maximize profits. The low-lying land of the maritime region was too damp to favour grain production, but its rich pastures were eminently suitable for cattle. Moreover, the availability of cheap bread grains from the Baltic satisfied much of the home demand and allowed local farmers to switch to more profitable areas of production. Dutch farmers began to specialize in the production of butter and cheese, often for export, as well as in the fattening of beef cattle for the market, again partly for export (though in Zeeland the shortage of fresh water limited the number of cattle that could be supported, and here farmers specialized in wheat, among other profitable crops). As farmers concentrated on producing for the market, they themselves became a market for goods and services from the growing towns, and so the development of the rural sector both stimulated and was facilitated by the urban trading economy. This long-term transformation of the rural sector was a key element in the creation of the Dutch economic miracle.

Perhaps of less fundamental importance, but still a major factor in Dutch success, was the North Sea herring fishery. Fishing was a major asset to the Dutch economy and herring was by far the most important catch. Besides providing an important source of protein for the local diet, and employment for large numbers of fishermen, the herring fishery also stimulated other areas of the economy. The

building of specialized fishing boats gave work to shipbuilding and ancillary industries, while packing and transporting the herring brought further employment opportunities. Trade was also boosted as cured herring was a valuable export item, notably to neighbouring Catholic countries, and the high-quality salt needed for the curing process was brought from the salt pans of France, Portugal and, later, Venezuela. Given the size of the merchant and fishing fleets it is hardly surprising that Holland developed a major shipbuilding industry which in turn, given the shortage of native supplies, stimulated the trade in timber and other naval stores with Scandinavia. In the course of the seventeenth century shipbuilding became increasingly concentrated in the villages along the banks of the river Zaan to the west of Amsterdam, while Hoorn and Enkhuizen in the north of Holland specialized in the timber trade with Norway. However, textiles remained the most important industry, especially in terms of providing valuable goods for export. The two major textile manufacturing towns were Leiden for woollen cloth and Haarlem for linen. The industry was fed by imports – raw wool and flax, together with half-finished cloth from England – and much of the production was exported in turn. The dependence of the textile industry on imports on the one hand and foreign markets on the other may have stimulated trade but it also made it very vulnerable in the long term to foreign competition and protectionism.

Indeed, it was both a strength and a potential weakness of the Dutch economy that much of its success came from supplying the goods and services other countries could not provide for themselves at this time. The Dutch entrepôt acted as a gigantic warehouse, bringing in goods from all over Europe, and indeed the world, and re-exporting them to the most favourable markets, making a substantial profit along the way. However, as the European trading system developed such intermediary services would no longer be required, or at least not to such an extent, and there would be nothing the Dutch could do to prevent such a shift in trading patterns from taking place, as indeed proved to be the case in the eighteenth century. The Dutch textile industry was heavily dependent on foreign markets, and had to rely on high quality and competitive prices rather than any natural advantages for its success. It would not in the end be able to defend itself against competition which developed in other countries





Joannes Janssonius, Map of the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands, 1658.

behind protectionist barriers. So it might be said that the Dutch economy, despite its brilliant success, was considerably more vulnerable than it appeared to envious contemporaries. However, it is the wealth and not the underlying fragility of the Dutch economy which dominates the Golden Century. This prosperity, however, was far from evenly spread throughout the Republic. The Dutch economic miracle was largely confined to the province of Holland, though the maritime region as a whole shared this success to a more limited extent. The land provinces, in contrast, can at best be said to have stagnated up to the middle of the seventeenth century, and subsequent modest growth proved to be short-lived. So in economic terms the land provinces did not share in the economic boom of the seventeenth century, and only Holland enjoyed it to the full. The cultural implications of these sharp differences within a relatively small geographical area have to be taken into account when considering the nature of the Dutch Golden Century.

It is a commonplace that Dutch history has been profoundly marked by the struggle against the sea. It is perhaps not so readily appreciated that the need to control inland water has been almost



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Jan van de Capelle, *River Scene with Large Ferry*, c. 1665, oil on canvas.

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Philip Koninck, *An Extensive Landscape with a Road by a River*, c. 1670, oil on canvas.

as great a challenge, as recent floods have reminded us. In this long history, the period between the late sixteenth century and the middle of the seventeenth was one of the most important chapters and brought dramatic changes to the geography of the maritime region. In a very real sense the drainage schemes of this period created a new landscape, with the most profound changes taking place in Holland, though on a lesser scale and a little later Zeeland-Flanders was created out of almost nothing. The problem facing the Dutch living in the maritime region was the low-lying nature of much of the land. By the later sixteenth century the sinking of the older drained areas (polders) had become a serious problem, and rising sea-levels were making the old sea defences increasingly vulnerable. Major incursions from the sea were becoming more frequent, and this threat had become a particularly acute by the sixteenth century, leading to major losses of land to the sea as well as the deaths of people and animals and large-scale damage to property. Between the late sixteenth and the middle of the seventeenth century this daunting challenge was more than adequately met by a combination of improvements in the efficiency of local water-control organizations, better drainage techniques and the ready availability of capital for drainage schemes intended to produce new agricultural land.



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Aert van der Neer, *A Landscape with a River at Evening*, c. 1660s, oil on canvas.

Between the middle of the sixteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century the area of cultivable land in Holland increased by over a third, and the increase in the alluvial lands of the maritime region as a whole was almost as great.<sup>6</sup> This transformation was achieved through a combination of dyke-construction to improve protection from the sea and the drainage of lakes and fens, and well over half of this process was complete by the middle of the seventeenth century. Dutch painting may be better known and more widely appreciated, but the creation of a new landscape was perhaps the greatest collective cultural achievement of the Golden Age. From this perspective, the prominence of landscape painting in Dutch seventeenth-century art can be seen, in part at least, as a reaction to the radical changes that were taking place in the Dutch countryside, recording what was being lost and celebrating what was new.

The most obviously far-reaching changes took place in north Holland. Before the reclamations this region was almost as much water as land, with extensive lakes connected to the sea, allowing a village like De Rijp, which was near its centre, to take at least a modest part in the herring fishery. By the middle of the seventeenth



century these extensive stretches of water had been cut off from the sea and drained, and the region had been converted from a vulnerable mixture of land, water and sea into a solid land mass which was better protected from the sea than before and contained a third more agricultural land. Less spectacular but cumulatively even more important were the similar developments throughout the maritime region – including Zeeland, the islands of south Holland and the coastal strip of Friesland and Groningen, besides the creation of the major polders in the centre of Holland. These drainage schemes were made possible by improvements in the design of the windmills that provided the power needed to pump the water out of the land. Much of the drained area was below sea-level, certainly in the new polders, and whole batteries of windmills were required to drain the polders and keep them dry. The changes in windmill design were not spectacular but they were effective, notably the introduction of a system by which the top only of a mill could be swivelled to make the best use of any available wind rather than having to turn the whole body of the mill, as had been the case previously. The new techniques made the drainage schemes



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Esaias van de Velde, *Winter Landscape*, 1623, oil on panel.

possible, but it was the readiness of investors to put their money into these projects which made them a reality. The availability of relatively cheap capital for investment was both a result of Dutch economic success and one of its causes, and the drainage schemes of this period attracted an enormous amount of investment. Merchants and others sank money into land-reclamation because they expected to make substantial profits from these investments, encouraged by the secular increase in prices for agricultural products in Europe which lasted from the early sixteenth century until the 1640s. With rising food prices, dairy farming and the fattening-up of imported beef cattle were notably profitable enterprises which made investment in drainage schemes particularly attractive. It is no coincidence that when agricultural prices faltered around the middle of the seventeenth century, the great era of land drainage came to an end. By this point, however, the landscape of the maritime region had already been irrevocably changed.

The growth of towns in this period was perhaps less visually striking than the changes in the nature of the countryside, but was at least as important in determining the environment in which the cultural achievements of the Golden Age took place. Dutch society was very much an urban society, though here again a fundamental difference between the maritime region and the land provinces has to be taken into account. By the early sixteenth century the northern Netherlands as a whole was already a highly urbanized area by the standards of the time, but subsequently the towns of the land provinces stagnated while those in the maritime region entered into a period of almost explosive growth which continued into the second half of the seventeenth century. Urbanization was most advanced in Holland: already by the middle of the sixteenth century around 50 per cent of the population of the province lived in towns and a century later this had risen to over 60 per cent. The large number of towns involved was as significant as the overall growth in both the relative and absolute size of towns. Urban growth in Holland was not concentrated on a single metropolis, or even on a few large cities, but was spread to a greater or a lesser extent over twenty or more towns. Admittedly, Amsterdam was by far the biggest, rising to about 200,000 by the later seventeenth century, but by that time the population of Leiden had increased to around 65,000 and Rotterdam to around 45,000, and Haarlem had already reached

just under 40,000 in 1622 (though its population may have begun to decline by the middle of the century). In addition there was an impressive number of towns with a population of between 10,000 and 25,000: Dordrecht, Delft, Gouda, Alkmaar, Hoorn, Enkhuizen and The Hague, not to mention the villages along the Zaan, which had a combined population of around 20,000 by the end of the century. The rest of the towns of the province were very much smaller, but still respectable by contemporary European standards. However, in some ways the concept of urbanization is too narrow to explain what was happening in Holland, for the economic and social structure and, not least, the culture of the towns was spreading to the countryside. With the rural sector increasingly integrated with the towns through the power of the market, the larger villages of the province were taking on marked urban characteristics, albeit on a smaller scale. What might be called the urbanization of the countryside was well advanced by the middle of the seventeenth century, though the political dominance of the towns continued largely unchallenged.

By the later seventeenth century market forces had penetrated to every level of the economy of Holland, integrating the towns, the larger villages and farms. Farmers specialized in what their land was best suited to produce and which brought the best prices, and this made them dependent for all their other needs on supplies and services from the villages and towns. The links between farmers, villages and towns were also strengthened by a relatively efficient communications system, principally by water. The towns were commercial and manufacturing centres, and they too tended to specialize. All were involved with commerce to some extent, though some were primarily trading towns while others were more heavily involved in manufactures. Leiden and Haarlem were the great textile centres, Delft depended heavily on its pottery and Gouda on the making of clay pipes, while the Zaan area was the most important centre in the province for shipbuilding together with its ancillary industries. With the exception of Amsterdam, the trading towns tended to specialize in particular regions or commodities: Rotterdam, for example, traded with England, the Southern Netherlands and northern France and dominated the wine trade, while Hoorn specialized in the timber trade with Norway to supply the needs of the Zaan shipyards, Dordrecht tried to monopolize trade along the Rhine and Maas, and

Enkhuizen became the most important home-port for the herring fishery. Amsterdam's chief importance was as the centre of a world-wide trading system and as the financial capital of Europe, but it also produced a wide range of goods and services. In contrast, The Hague was unique among the towns of Holland as its importance rested not on trade or manufacture but on politics and administration. As it was the place where both the States General and the States of Holland met, it became the political and diplomatic centre of the Republic and the home of the main Generality institutions. It also stood out as it remained formally a village and, like those along the Zaan, it had no representation in the States of Holland.

To some extent the towns of Holland acted as a single integrated urban system, though the harmony of their interaction should perhaps not be exaggerated. The different economic orientation of the various towns meant that, apart from the priority they all gave to economic considerations, their interests did not always coincide and rivalry was often acute. Besides the fundamental contrast between the economic needs of trading and manufacturing towns, Amsterdam's interests did not always coincide with those of the other trading towns with their more specialized commercial palettes, while the latter competed vigorously among themselves, sometimes to the point of violence.<sup>7</sup> A weakness of this urban system was the danger that the preponderance of Amsterdam would unbalance it, but nevertheless it worked effectively for much of the century. It could not, however, have worked so well without the structural integration of the towns of the province with a ruthlessly market-oriented rural sector; Holland as a whole can be seen as an efficiently integrated economic system and the sharp contrast socially and economically between town and country that was typical for most of Europe in this period was almost entirely lacking. The farmer in Holland was as much a capitalist as the urban merchant or manufacturer.

If the Dutch in a sense transformed their country internally, they can also be said to have expanded their territory externally, not by conquering neighbouring areas of Europe but by moving into the extra-European world. While the actual boundaries of the Republic were not settled until 1648 so that, for example, the Golden Age was half over before the eastern half of North Brabant was brought definitively within the new Dutch state, this was the limit of Dutch

territorial claims in Europe. In contrast to this essentially defensive stance as far as territory in Europe was concerned, this was the great age of Dutch overseas expansion. The beginning of Dutch trading ventures outside Europe can be traced to the 1590s, not coincidentally the beginning of the take-off of the Dutch economy in general. While the Spanish and even the Portuguese colonial empires of the sixteenth century had been built on military and naval power, it was the strength of their economy in Europe which made the Dutch seaborne empire possible. The foundation of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in 1602 through the amalgamation of a number of competing companies led with remarkable speed to the establishment of a trading empire stretching from the Cape of Good Hope to Japan. The initial aim was control of the spice trade, and so the Moluccas and the Banda Islands in the Indonesian archipelago were obvious targets, but by the end of the seventeenth century the VOC also controlled most of Java and Sri Lanka, had trading posts on both coasts of India and in Malaysia, and were the only Europeans permitted (under very close supervision) to trade with Japan under the Tokugawa shogunate. Thus, although the primary aim of the VOC was trading profit, the Dutch ended up almost inadvertently founding a colonial empire in the East. Dutch efforts in Africa and the Americas, largely the work of the West India Company (WIC, founded in 1621), were distinctly less successful, though they were able to establish important trading posts along the coast of West Africa, take over some West Indian islands and found the colony of New Netherland in North America.

The WIC's most ambitious project was the attempt to conquer the northern part of Brazil from the Portuguese. Although the company succeeded at first, its resources proved insufficient to the challenge in the long term, and the final loss of Brazil helped to bring the company down. The WIC's colony in North America, New Netherland, is in many ways just as instructive a case as regards the character of Dutch overseas expansion in this period. It was an attempt to establish a colony of settlers in an environment that was reasonably hospitable for Europeans, but it was always struggling and eventually fell to the English in 1665 and definitively in 1674. Part of the problem was that emigration was not a particularly attractive prospect for the Dutch – the Republic attracted immigrants rather

than pushing out emigrants – but the lukewarm and uncertain approach of the WIC did not help. The primary aim of the company was profit and, apart from the fur trade, New Netherland did not offer much in the way of goods suitable for trade – at least not in the short term. This is perhaps the key to understanding both the successes and the failures of Dutch overseas activities: primarily the Dutch were not concerned with creating a colonial empire, but with profit through trade. The empire in the East came as a by-product of this drive for profit, while in the West trading opportunities were much more limited and profit more elusive. In the end Dutch investors turned away from the WIC as its costs – especially in Brazil – soared and its profits declined, while the profits from the import of spices and other valuable commodities from the East drove the VOC confidently forward for much of the century.

One of the most important factors shaping Dutch social as well as economic life was the efficiency of transport and communications. Movement of people and goods through almost all of the Republic was easy and relatively swift by the standards of the time – but by water, not by land. This was one of the advantages of a low-lying country with an abundance of water, and the Dutch made the most of the possibilities their peculiar topography offered. Rivers, lakes and canals enabled boats and barges to reach nearly all the country – though the maritime region was inevitably best served – and even heavy goods could be transported relatively cheaply. Access to good communications by water was vital for the economic welfare of the towns of Holland, not only to connect them to the sea but also to each other and to as wide an economic hinterland as possible. Indeed, one of the causes of friction between the towns of Holland in the wake of the great drainage schemes was the determination of each and every one of them not to be disadvantaged by the reduced opportunities for transport by water.<sup>8</sup> Existing canals were improved, new ones dug and a whole new system of specialized canals to carry passenger barges created that linked all the major towns by the middle of the seventeenth century.<sup>9</sup> These *trekvaarten* ran regular services according to a fixed schedule between the major towns, and rapidly became an important part of Dutch cultural as well as economic life. It is striking that many contemporary pamphlets took the form of imaginary discussions taking place on a passenger barge, as this was where people

from different provinces, occupations and status might be expected to come together. While it might be doubted that many such conversations ever actually took place, it does show that in only a matter of decades this mode of transport had become an integral part of Dutch social life. This phenomenon is a reminder that efficient transport helped to bring the Dutch together politically and socially as much as it furthered economic integration. Distances within the Dutch Republic were relatively short, and the transport system effectively made them much shorter. Trips that might take days by land in another country could be made in an afternoon in Holland, and consultations between, for example, a town's delegation to the States of Holland and their principals at home was thus less time-consuming and cumbersome than has often been thought. More generally, this ease of movement between towns, and between towns and the countryside, facilitated artistic and intellectual exchanges, and made a significant contribution to the cultural vitality of Holland in particular.

The vital importance of transport by water is, of course, almost self-evident with regard to Dutch trade in Europe and around the world; without access to the sea the Dutch Republic simply could not have become the economic force it did. Although the significance of trade with Germany and the Southern Netherlands along inland waterways should not be underestimated, nevertheless the most important branches of Dutch trade were seaborne – trade with the Baltic, France and the Mediterranean, as well as with the Americas and the East Indies. In consequence, in addition to the innumerable barges and boats used on the rivers and canals and the large fishing fleet, the Dutch had an enormous merchant marine – the latter so large and apparently ubiquitous that its size was vastly overestimated even, or especially, by well-informed foreigners. The workhorse of the merchant fleet was the *fluit*, a ship specifically designed to carry cargo economically. Its design was perfected around the end of the sixteenth century, and it was especially suited to the carriage of bulk goods, such as grain. There was even a subtype for the timber trade able to accommodate extra-long pieces of wood for masts. The drawback to reliance on such ships and boats was that their very economic efficiency made them vulnerable to predation. The herring fleet was supremely successful at what it did, but was very difficult to defend in time of war, especially when the boats had cast their

nets. Similarly, in an age when merchant ships were usually designed, in part at least, with defence in mind – and for attack when the opportunity offered – the *fluit* had a large cargo space, minimal crew and could not defend itself very effectively. So the seaborne aspect of the Dutch transport system needed a large navy for its defence, but protecting the Dutch merchant fleet was an almost impossible task given its size and the great geographical range of its activities. The Dutch navy in the age of Tromp and De Ruyter became one of the most formidable fighting forces of the time, but it could never fully protect all the Dutch trading routes and fishing grounds – the task was simply too great. It even proved impracticable to blockade the coast of the Spanish Netherlands effectively, and royal ships and privateers operating out of Dunkirk remained a major problem until the end of the Eighty Years War. In this case, as in so many aspects of Dutch life in the Golden Age, success brought its own problems, and ones which were in the end probably insoluble.

The demography of the northern Netherlands followed very much the same curve as that of the economy, with vigorous growth in the sixteenth century – interrupted only by the first years of the Revolt – followed by accelerated growth in the early seventeenth century. The total population of the Republic reached a peak of around two million in the second half of the century. The pattern of growth before the Revolt was fairly even throughout the northern Netherlands but, in parallel with the economy, the increase during the seventeenth century was largely confined to the maritime region and was at its most vigorous in Holland. Much remains obscure about the demographic history of this period, but it seems clear that the population boom of the Golden Age could not have taken place without large-scale immigration. In particular the enormous growth in the population of the towns of Holland – which lasted until the third quarter of the seventeenth century in the case of the larger towns – could not have been the result of natural increase. Indeed, it was normal for European towns in this period to have more deaths than births for a variety of reasons, and not just because they were unhealthy places to live – though urban populations were particularly vulnerable to epidemic diseases and this was an important factor while bubonic plague remained a constant threat. The demographic growth of the towns of Holland was, of course, a result of their



extraordinary economic success, but its extent was possible only by means of migration on three levels. First, movement into the towns from the surrounding countryside was spurred on by a combination of rural population growth and the switch to less labour-intensive types of farming such as dairying. Next, there was migration from the less economically vigorous provinces of the Republic to the towns of Holland. Finally there was immigration from outside the Republic, northwest Europe in particular, drawn by the economic opportunities available in Holland.

Numerically most important were the immigrants from neighbouring areas of Germany, but the influx from the southern Netherlands – emigrating for religious as well as economic reasons, notably after the fall of Antwerp to the Spanish in 1585 – had an incalculable impact on the life of the new state. The booming economy and relatively tolerant atmosphere also attracted those suffering from religious persecution elsewhere. Besides Protestants from the Spanish Netherlands, there were English dissidents, Protestant sects from various parts of central and northern Europe and Huguenots fleeing France before and after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. None of these groups may have been particularly significant in terms of numbers though their cultural influence was important. Similarly, the impact of the settlement of groups of Jews in the Republic was in many ways disproportionate to their small numbers. First to arrive were the so-called Jews of the Portuguese Nation: the Sephardic Jews of Spain and Portugal had been subjected to forced conversion to Christianity, but from the last decade of the sixteenth century groups began to arrive in Amsterdam and started to reclaim their religious and communal identity. Later in the century, Ashkenazi from central and eastern Europe began to arrive in the Republic in the wake of intensified persecution. The two groups were very different, not only through their different religious traditions, but also in their economic signature. The Portuguese Jews were a relatively prosperous group and included merchants with important international trading connections, while the Ashkenazi were in the main refugees with very limited economic assets.

In addition to permanent settlement, agricultural workers from all over northwestern Europe were drawn in for seasonal work in the Republic, and other groups came for longer or shorter periods of

time. There was a regular movement of young women from western Germany across the Zuider Zee to find employment as maidservants in the towns of Holland and Amsterdam in particular. Their aim was to work long enough to put together a dowry and then return to their homes to marry and settle down. However, things did not always go to plan and unwanted pregnancies and other accidents of life often made their stays in the Republic more permanent than they had originally intended. The Dutch army was also an important employer of foreign labour, as it would seem that the prosperity of the Republic meant that it was difficult to fill its ranks from the native supply. It has been estimated that anywhere from 40 per cent to 60 per cent of the army at any one time was made of men born outside the boundaries of the Dutch state; this, given that the size of the army rose to over 100,000 by the end of the century, meant a considerable number of men.<sup>10</sup> Although the numbers involved were much smaller in this case, the navy too recruited a significant proportion of its seamen from outside the Republic. Like other groups of migrant workers, it is probable that many of these recruits finally settled permanently in the Republic. The trading towns also had an ever-shifting population of foreign merchants, agents, sailors and the like. The long-term demographic effects of these movements of population are unclear, but they certainly contributed to the rich human variety of the booming towns of Holland.

Immigration was undoubtedly an important influence on the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century but its extent remains uncertain and undoubtedly varied greatly from province to province and even town to town. First of all, the impact of immigration was mostly restricted to the maritime region, with the land provinces being a source of emigrants rather than offering attractive economic opportunities to outsiders. Further, most of the immigrants were drawn to Holland as the heart of the economic boom, and within Holland the bigger towns attracted more newcomers than the countryside and smaller towns. Above all Amsterdam was the great magnet for immigrants and by the later seventeenth century something like a third of its population had been born outside the Republic. Furthermore some of the newcomers may not have stayed long; there is evidence to suggest that a high proportion of 'Dutch' colonists in New Netherland, for example, were in fact immigrants who had

hardly had time to put down roots in the Republic before moving on. Nevertheless, it can be said that the Republic in the seventeenth century had both a mobile population internally and a high level of immigration, and the culture of the Golden Age was profoundly affected by these factors. On the other hand most of these groups of immigrants seem to have been assimilated into Dutch society with remarkably little friction. It is true that the influx of Southern Netherlanders seems to have inflamed the political and religious tensions which led to the crisis during the Truce (1609–21), but subsequently their integration into Dutch life appears to have been smooth and their cultural contribution should not be underestimated (though neither should it be exaggerated, as has sometimes been the case). The initial difficulty of assimilating the Southern Netherlanders was that most of them arrived within a decade or so of the fall of Antwerp in 1585. In contrast, immigrants moving from nearby regions of Germany may have been greater in total numbers but were spread out fairly evenly over the century, and they certainly seem to have had little problem integrating into Dutch society. Later in the century the Huguenot refugees were much smaller in number, yet their contribution to Dutch cultural life in the last decades of the century was considerable despite the fact that few of them were apparently prepared to go to the bother of learning Dutch. Most of these immigrant groups came from very similar social and cultural backgrounds to the society they were joining, which partly explains their relatively smooth assimilation. Nevertheless the speed with which some of them disappeared into Dutch society remains surprising. An example is the schoolmaster David Beck, who was born and brought up in Cologne, came to the Republic in 1617, and only seven years later was writing his private journal in Dutch.<sup>11</sup> However, this was not a one-way process – Dutch society was also deeply affected by this constant stream of newcomers, and on a variety of levels. Merchants and manufacturers from Antwerp and the textile areas of the Southern Netherlands shaped and boosted the booming Dutch economy during the early years of the century; maids from southern Norway served Amsterdam households; Danish seamen served in both the Dutch navy and merchant fleet; and the Huguenot diaspora brought leading European intellectuals such as Pierre Bayle to the Republic. With regard to culture in particular it is, of course,

difficult if not impossible to distinguish between the specific influence of immigrants and the more general openness of Dutch society to outside ideas. However, these movements of people to the new Dutch state can only have strengthened this readiness to absorb influences from the rest of Europe. The Dutch Golden Age was a very distinct moment in cultural history, but it was also very much a part of a broader European civilization.

There was another important way in which the Dutch Republic was a part of Europe in this century; its geographical position, its birth in revolt against Spanish rule and its religious orientation meant that it could not avoid involvement in warfare, either through having to fight for its independence or through being dragged into the wars which were practically endemic in Europe during the early modern period. So although the Dutch of the Golden Age are now famed for their astonishing economic success and remarkable cultural achievements rather than their martial prowess, they were in fact more often than not at war, on both land and sea. The struggle for independence alone lasted with varying intensity until 1648, and subsequently wars with both England and France meant that the Dutch were never able to rest on their laurels. They may have wished to be left alone – after the peace with Spain they had no further territorial ambitions, at least in Europe – but they were never allowed that luxury. Warfare did, however, bring opportunities as well as problems. It may well be that the Dutch economy would have grown even faster in the early seventeenth century had it not been for the continuing war with Spain, but this is far from being the whole story, as in the event this conflict was almost certainly the most important stimulus initially for Dutch colonial expansion. The Eighty Years War was also fought on a global scale – in the Americas, along the coasts of India and in the East Indies – and its conclusion left the Dutch as a major colonial power. War shaped and transformed Dutch development in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and without it Dutch history would have been very different. However, there is also some truth in the widespread contemporary conviction that war was damaging to the Dutch Republic, and especially to its prosperity. The Dutch Republic was a small country with vulnerable land frontiers in the south and east, and was heavily dependent on trading and fishing fleets that were very difficult to

defend in time of war. If the Republic was able to rise to major power status during the war with Spain, it can equally be said that the wars with France in the later seventeenth century hastened its decline. Warfare was not perhaps always as harmful as it sometimes seemed, but the Dutch economy worked best in peacetime, and especially well if the Republic were at peace and some of its competitors mired in hostilities. Dutch commercial interests were not just Europe-wide but stretched round most of the known world, and wars and political disruptions inevitably interfered with the flow of trade.

The dominant political groups in the Republic – the urban oligarchs or regents – gave a political priority to the interests of merchants and manufacturers that was alien to the rest of Europe, which was still largely obsessed with striving for political glory and enforcing religious uniformity, but this was not enough to ensure peace. In any case the preference for peace was pragmatic rather than idealistic, and the regents were far from averse to using force to protect or promote the economic interests of their country – and especially that of their own towns. The Dutch used the power of their navy to help to consolidate their domination of the Baltic grain trade (the Danes used their control of the Sound to levy a toll on all shipping entering and leaving the Baltic, but the strength of their navy meant that the Dutch were able to insist on particularly favourable terms for their own ships and cargo). Again the naval wars with England may have been primarily the result of English aggression, but Dutch intransigence in the defence of their trade played a part as well. Even in the wars with France after 1672, which were – in Dutch eyes at least – about the survival of their independence, significant economic considerations were involved. In the negotiations to end the war of 1672–8, the rescinding or moderation of the punitive French tariffs of 1668 against Dutch trade was a vital issue. However, the economic importance of trade with France meant that in this case war was rather too crude an instrument of policy to be used except as a last resort. The Dutch Republic fought France for political – and perhaps religious – reasons, but not for economic. Mostly, however, the Dutch went to war because they could not avoid it. In the first half of the century, the growing tensions in the Holy Roman Empire and then the Thirty Years War interacted with the continuation of the war with Spain to draw the Republic into a

pan-European struggle, increasing both the dangers and the complexity of the problems it had to face. Later, the Dutch had little choice but to defend themselves against English attacks, and the apparently overwhelming power of Louis XIV's France seemed an even greater threat. In retrospect it can be argued that France was less of a danger that it seemed and that Willem III's semi-crusade against French power was unnecessarily inflexible, but the Dutch did not have the benefit of hindsight, and after the near disaster of 1672 their fears were understandable. A regime dominated by Amsterdam and Holland rather than Willem III might well have taken a more moderate line with regard to France, but it has to be admitted that the Dutch room for manoeuvre in the last three decades of the seventeenth century was distinctly limited. When given the choice, the Dutch preferred peace, but the situation in Europe for much of the seventeenth century did not allow them that luxury.

If the Dutch were all too often drawn into wars in Europe they could not avoid, the situation outside Europe was quite different and displayed a markedly different aspect of Dutch character during the Golden Age. Both the VOC and the WIC used armed force as a matter of course and their activities were, in part at least, extensions of the war against Spain in the Low Countries into a global dimension. Indeed, the WIC was founded to coincide with the reopening of the war with Spain in 1621 and was intended to weaken Spain by attacking its position in the Americas. Although there may be some doubt as how important its contribution to the war was, the capture of the Spanish Silver Fleet in 1628 and its occupation of part of the Portuguese colony of Brazil certainly made some contribution to the overall war effort. Indeed the end of the war with Spain in 1648 took away a good part of the *raison d'être* of the company, and made its eventual failure almost inevitable. In contrast the VOC was always more determinedly focused on profit, even at the expense of strategic considerations. Its attempt to take over the Portuguese spice trade was certainly an indirect contribution to the war effort, but its motive was almost entirely commercial. However, this is not to say that the VOC's history in this period was pacific: far from it. The company aimed at gaining and maintaining monopolies where possible, and was prepared to use armed force to support these goals

if necessary – and it nearly always was. Force was used both against Asians and against European rivals: the so-called Amboina massacre of 1623 soured relations between the England and the Dutch for decades, and was still being dredged up forty years later. The VOC needed its own army and navy to survive, let alone prosper, and harsh measures were taken to enforce its monopoly in the Moluccas and the Banda Islands, not to mention the conquest of much of Java and Sri Lanka by the end of the century. In general Dutch activities in Asia were accompanied by a background noise of violence. So if the warfare, together with less formal use of violence, in Dutch colonial activities is taken into account, then the Dutch Republic was not just involved in warfare more often than not, it was constantly involved in armed conflict throughout the Golden Age.

There is a sense in which the culture of early modern Europe was profoundly affected by the inescapable reality of war, and in this respect at least the Dutch Republic was no exception to the general European rule. Images derived from warfare littered both the literature of the time and, less self-consciously perhaps, the everyday written and spoken language. Most Christians of the period believed that they were already at war in a religious sense; the apocalyptic struggle between God and the Devil, Christ and Antichrist, was a fundamental and permanent element of the Christian world-view, and from time to time in Christian history the final battle in this conflict was felt to be imminent. Since the Reformation such millenarian expectations had intensified to become the dominant mode of experience, and political conflicts as well as religious differences were seen and understood in this light. One of the reasons why religious toleration was so difficult to achieve, and so little valued if it was, was the need people felt to be on the right side in this titanic struggle between good and evil – in such a war there could be no middle ground, and no room for even honest doubt. Only towards the end of the seventeenth century does this sense of an impending apocalypse begin to fade, leaving room for rather more nuanced conceptions of religious experience to come to the surface.

It is against this background that the religious pluralism of the Dutch Republic needs to be understood. It helps to explain why religious toleration was by no means an universally accepted good, rather the reverse in fact. One of the few things that all churches and sects

of the seventeenth century had in common was the belief that there was only one true religion and that any deviation from this – however slight – was an abomination in the eyes of God. Very few were prepared to entertain the idea that there might be more than one route to religious truth. Admittedly, there was a relatively tolerant strain in religious thought in this period, but it struggled to be heard amid the constant clamour of religious controversy which typified the age. In any case, even this view of limited toleration was a far cry from fully embracing religious diversity. As far as the Netherlands is concerned an ecumenical tradition can be traced back at least to the great humanist Erasmus in the early sixteenth century. He argued that only a very few core beliefs were necessary for the Christian – such as that the Bible was the word of God and that Christ was the son of God – and that most of the knotty theological issues that divided Christians during the Reformation and after should be treated as *adiaphora* (things indifferent), as they were in any case essentially beyond human comprehension. Later a tolerant Protestant theological tradition, from Coornhert in the late sixteenth century, through the Remonstrant theologian Episcopius, to Jean Le Clerc, developed in the Dutch Republic, but it was far from dominant and it was also decidedly limited in scope. Even at the end of the seventeenth century, liberal Protestants still continued to regard the Catholic Church, if not all Catholics, as evil. However, conceptually quite separate from this strain of tolerant theology was a reluctance to persecute for the sake of religious uniformity and it was this attitude which most clearly distinguished the Republic from most of the rest of seventeenth-century Europe. The Netherlands had experienced perhaps the most severe episodes of religious persecution in Europe in the sixteenth century, enforced by the Spanish authorities despite the reluctance of provincial and local authorities to co-operate. It was in part in reaction to this experience that the regents in the Republic were so determined not to allow anything like it to happen again. In particular, they were not prepared to allow persecution of Catholics to replace persecution of Protestants. There was, of course, a pragmatic aspect to this refusal to try to enforce religious uniformity. First of all it was impractical – no authority existed in the Republic which could force provinces, town governments and other local authorities to persecute religious



dissidents against their wishes. Second, for decades after the Revolt the majority of the Dutch population were not affiliated to the official church – the Reformed Church – and any attempt to make membership compulsory would have been unacceptably disruptive both socially and economically. In addition, throughout the seventeenth century the Republic had, and needed, Catholic allies – in the first half of the century the French and later the Spanish and Austrians – and so the treatment of Dutch Catholics remained a sensitive issue in foreign policy terms.

The Dutch case is striking because it went against the European grain. The Reformation may have broken the monopoly of the Catholic Church in Europe but it did not lead to greater religious freedom. Instead, in both Catholic and Protestant Europe governments tried to enforce religious uniformity on their subjects, and loyalty to the state became inextricably linked to adherence to its official church. In this atmosphere, failure to conform to the state church was regarded as tantamount to treason. The Dutch Republic was markedly different in this respect: although there was an official church – the Reformed Church – Dutch citizens were not required to be members of the church or to attend its services. Mennonites and other Protestant dissenters had in practice more or less complete freedom of worship, though there were provincial and local variations in the flexibility of civil authorities in this regard. Catholics were formally forbidden to worship in public, but they enjoyed freedom of conscience. Even Jewish settlement was tolerated, though under rigid political and legal supervision. This situation was not the result of any peculiar virtue inherent to the Dutch or to Dutch society, but rather was a consequence of circumstances, together with the decidedly pragmatic attitudes of the civil authorities across the board. During the first decades of the Revolt only a small minority of the population of the rebel provinces were committed supporters of the Reformed Church and, although they were able to take a degree of control of the political system of the new state quite incommensurate with their numbers, they were never in a position to enforce religious conformity on the population as a whole. The Reformed Church was granted the use of existing churches and the revenues from the property of the old church were used to pay the salaries of its ministers, but both buildings and property remained in the hands of

the civil authorities. In the course of the seventeenth century, the position of the Reformed Church within the Dutch state was consolidated, and formally at least only its members were allowed to hold political office at any level. Nevertheless Dutch regents remained essentially pragmatic and seem to have given precedence to what were the primarily secular values of peace and prosperity over religious uniformity. Although it might be going too far to see this as an early triumph for secularism, it must be emphasized that not many governments in seventeenth-century Europe would have acted in this way. England took an important step in this direction after the revolution of 1688 – not without decisive Dutch influence, it must be said – but in France the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 and the associated brutal repression of French Protestants was a reminder of how alien the concept of religious toleration was to most of Europe even in the last years of the seventeenth century.

Not that Dutch Catholics were particularly grateful for the limited toleration they received. Catholics in general at this time seem to have had an unconscious but profound superiority complex, and regarded the dominance of their own church as the natural state of affairs and any limitation on this as oppression. As a result they could happily support the suppression of Protestants in Catholic countries while decrying any similar treatment of Catholics in Protestant countries, apparently without any conscious hypocrisy. While Catholics in the Republic enjoyed freedom of conscience, and so could believe what they wanted without fear of persecution, they could not worship in public or set up the religious institutions they wished. North Brabant, which remained almost totally Catholic, was ministered to from the Southern Netherlands but the rest of the Republic was established as a mission territory by the Catholic Church with stations replacing parishes and served by a mixture of secular and regular clergy. For much of the early seventeenth century it is difficult to calculate what proportion of the population of the Republic was Catholic. For many years after the outbreak of the Revolt Catholic organizations scarcely existed in much of the country, and the religious allegiance of much of the population remains unclear. However, by the middle of the century the organization of the Catholic mission was more or less complete, and the picture becomes considerably clearer. By then around a third of the Dutch population

seems to have been Catholic, though regional and local variations were enormous, with a heavy concentration of Catholics in the quasi-colony of North Brabant. Catholics enjoyed full civil rights but were excluded from political office – as were all outside the Reformed Church – and in some provinces, though not Holland, from membership of guilds as well (which was potentially a serious economic disability). They were also forced to worship in secret, though it must have been fairly obvious in most places where these so-called hidden churches were, and when these services were being held. Indeed, the fines levied for such illegal gatherings became an important source of income for local police officials (*schouten* and *baljuwen*), who in effect tolerated them in return for often substantial composition payments.

Protestants outside the Reformed Church, mainly Mennonites, in effect had freedom of worship, though the legal status of this was never entirely clear. It is true that Remonstrants were persecuted for some years after their expulsion from the Reformed Church in 1619, but this died away, despite protests from the orthodox, once they proved ready to accept the break and set up as an independent Protestant church. Admittedly they, like the Catholics, were excluded from political office, but so were the vast majority of the population in this oligarchic system so this restriction can hardly be considered a particular hardship. In fact, the relatively tolerant atmosphere in the Republic made it a magnet for refugees from religious persecution: English dissenters, French Huguenots and religious radicals from all over Europe. The newcomers needed to exercise a certain circumspection with regard to the views they published or expressed in public – in particular anti-trinitarians such as socinians were regarded as atheists, and so their views were beyond the pale – but they could believe what they wanted and express their beliefs as long as such discussions remained in private. Some of the most radical thinkers of the seventeenth century took advantage of this relatively liberal atmosphere: the French philosopher Descartes spent many years in the Republic and found some of his first disciples there, while Spinoza was born into the Jewish community of Amsterdam but found support among the religious and philosophical radicals who flourished in the Republic in the later years of the century. Spinoza managed to keep out of serious trouble despite the nature of his

religious views, which were blasphemous to most of his contemporaries, partly because his most provocative works were only published by his followers after his death.

The Dutch Republic as a whole experienced a degree of religious pluralism that was unique in seventeenth-century Europe, but this was most marked in the maritime region and most of all in Holland, where the towns displayed a religious variety which amazed and sometimes shocked foreign travellers. It is perhaps no accident that it was precisely in these towns that the culture of the Dutch Golden Age took shape and flourished.

## 2

# Structures and Change

The economic and social contrast between Holland, together with the maritime region of the Republic, and the land provinces was paralleled, perhaps not surprisingly, by a similar cultural division. In this respect the differences between the two regions were less clear cut, and certainly less easy to pin down, but constituted a fundamental and persistent division in Dutch culture throughout the Golden Age. It might be argued that there were in fact two cultures in the Republic and that they did not always find it easy to co-exist. In Holland the economic and social developments of the sixteenth century had laid the groundwork for profound cultural changes, and the accelerated economic growth of the first half of the seventeenth century further encouraged new ways of experiencing and understanding the world. In contrast, the stagnant economy of the land provinces in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries allowed the persistence of decidedly more conservative cultural values. Of course these cultural differences were not just regional: the rapid pace of change left many even, or particularly, in Holland uneasy at the values – or, as they saw it, the lack of them – they perceived as underpinning this new form of society. Nevertheless, it remains the case that, just as there were two Dutch economies, so there were also two contrasting cultures which were, in the first instance at least, regionally based.

By the later seventeenth century a new form of society had emerged in the province of Holland to match the transformation of its economy. Whether this can be considered to be the first modern society to match what De Vries and Van der Woude have labelled the first modern economy<sup>1</sup> is largely a matter of definition rather than of fact, but Holland if not the Republic as a whole had certainly begun to break out of the shackles of the pre-modern world and

display at least some of the most important characteristics of the modern. Two aspects of this transformation were particularly important: the triumph of the market economy, and the unprecedentedly high level of urbanization which had been reached by the middle of the century. Seen from a different perspective these economic developments did not just involve but were necessarily also social changes. To what extent these economic and social developments also implied, necessarily or not, equally far-reaching cultural changes is perhaps another matter. In any case, such changes in attitudes and perceptions were not made overnight, and there was a time-lag between infrastructural and cultural change as people and institutions struggled to hang on to inherited values while coming to terms with the challenge of a changing society. The Dutch Golden Age is a particularly intriguing case of a struggle between a powerful traditional cultural system, shared with and supported by much of the rest of Europe, and the values implicit in a new form of society and economy. In particular, the question was to what extent the social teachings of the Christian churches and the cultural priorities of the European Renaissance could survive the test of life in seventeenth-century Holland, and how far these values and principles were modified by the process of adaptation to this new form of society. The old world certainly did not go down without a fight, and this struggle between old and new, between Holland and the other provinces at one level but also within Holland itself, is one of the most important keys to an understanding of the apparently contradictory nature of significant aspects of Dutch culture in this period.

The seventeenth century saw the triumph of commercial capitalism in the Dutch Republic as a whole, but its impact can be seen most clearly in Holland, which was the dynamo driving Dutch economic success in Europe and beyond. As the power of the market penetrated to every level of Dutch society it necessarily brought about social change and less obviously, and perhaps less immediately, cultural change. The Low Countries had been one of the leading commercial and manufacturing regions of Europe from the late Middle Ages through to the early sixteenth century, though the lead had been taken by Flanders and Brabant, with the northern areas playing a much less prominent role. However, the modernization of Holland's economy can be traced back to the late fifteenth century

at least, and the economic importance of the province was already growing in the first half of the sixteenth century. Then in the course of the Revolt and the Eighty Years War it was able to wrest the lead from Flanders and Brabant, and Amsterdam was able to push Antwerp aside to become certainly the most important trading centre in the region and probably also in northern Europe. Throughout it was the towns of the region which had been the driving forces of the economy of the Low Countries, with the lead being taken successively by Bruges, Ghent and Antwerp, and by the beginning of the early modern period a distinctive urban culture had begun to emerge in marked contrast to the dominant aristocratic culture of the time in most of Europe.<sup>2</sup> So the developing economy of the northern Netherlands could not only build on a solid commercial and manufacturing base, but also benefit from a fertile cultural atmosphere. The urban culture of the Low Countries around 1500 not only prepared the ground for the developments in perceptions and ideas which came to fruition in Holland in the seventeenth century, but can also be seen as one of the driving forces behind the Dutch economic boom. The link between society and culture is not a matter of simple economic determinism; the Dutch economic boom would not have been possible if there had not been a cultural climate in the northern Netherlands which was to a significant extent already attuned to capitalist values.

It can be argued that the social change brought about by the economic growth of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was innovatory in scale rather than type. The growth of the towns of Holland increased the relative size of the urban economy, but the social structure of the towns remained much as it had been around 1500. The towns of Holland were trading and manufacturing centres, as the towns of the region had been before the boom, but they remained pre-industrial, as goods continued to be produced by hand with only very limited use of non-human or animal power. (Wind power was widely employed in sawmills and for water-pumps.) The result was that the social structure of Dutch towns was probably also very much as it had been before the boom: merchants and large-scale manufacturers at the top with local traders, craftsmen-traders, shopkeepers, skilled workers and then an uncertain mass of semi-skilled and unskilled workers (male and female, adults and children).

Alongside these was a substantial service sector of lawyers, notaries, doctors, schoolteachers (and in a handful of towns professors at universities and illustrious schools) and barber-surgeons, not to forget those who ministered to the religious needs of the population. Although the general shape and composition of the urban population remained essentially similar to what it had been before, there were some significant changes by the middle of the seventeenth century, especially in scale. Dutch success in international trade and manufacture for export meant that the leading merchants were considerably more wealthy than their sixteenth-century predecessors. The general increase in prosperity also reached down to the level of the smaller-scale merchants and trader-craftsmen and stimulated the expansion of the economy supplying their needs – butchers, bakers, tailors, shoemakers, apothecaries, inn-keepers and those employed by them.

A significant change that was not economically driven – at least not directly – was the transformation in how the religious needs of the population were catered for. With the Reformation the celibate priests, monks, nuns and friars of the Roman Catholic Church were replaced by ministers of the Reformed Church and other Protestant groups, and this not only greatly decreased the numbers of religious specialists in Dutch society but also changed their social status. In medieval Europe the clergy had been a separate estate, alongside the nobles and the third estate, with a special spiritual status marked by a distinctive way of life, including celibacy and characteristic modes of dress. Protestant ministers, in contrast, were expected to marry and their dress declared them to be part of the respectable middle classes. They were no longer a separate estate but were one of the learned professions, with a university education in theology behind them. Of course the Catholic clergy continued to exist – or had been reintroduced by the Holland Mission – but in much smaller numbers, with mission priests relying heavily on lay support and particularly on the services of semi-religious women, the *kloppjes*, whose status remained uncertain but who played an indispensable role in ensuring Catholic survival in the Republic. The outcome was that the body of religious specialists serving the needs of the urban population was much smaller than before the Reformation, and had also radically changed in its composition. It was now – with



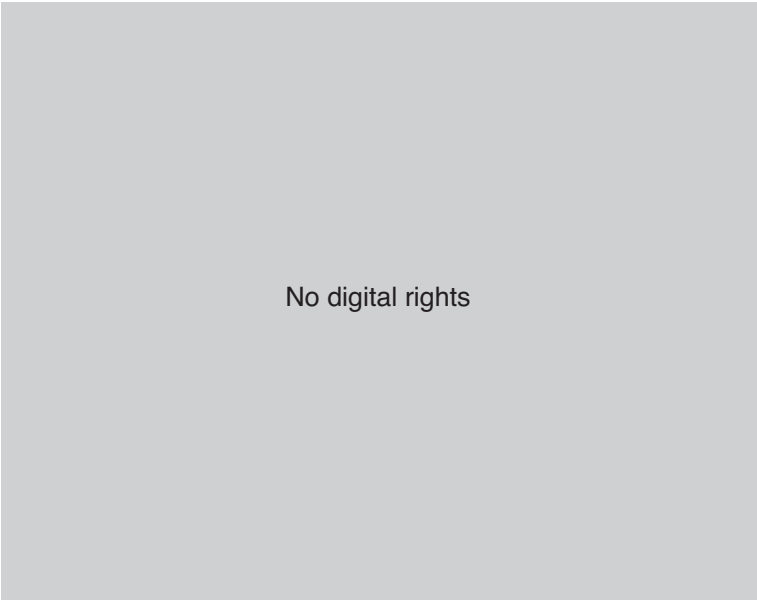


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Jan van der Heyden, *The Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal and the Oude Haarlemmersluis*,  
Amsterdam, c. 1670, oil on panel.

the exception of the *klopjes* – exclusively male and its members, whether ministers of the official Reformed Church or of one of the various Mennonite sects, were distinguished by specialized education and training or personal qualities rather than by a separate legal and spiritual status.

So, although there had been a modest degree of change in urban society as a result of the century and a half of economic growth from the beginning of the sixteenth century, the growth in the relative size of the towns is the most important development evident by the late seventeenth century. By the standards of contemporary Europe, Holland had already been highly urbanized as early as the middle of the previous century, but a hundred years later over 60 per cent of the population of the province lived and worked in the towns. Of course, the towns were not all of a piece: they varied enormously in size and had distinct economic profiles. On the one hand there was the giant Amsterdam, a trading and financial centre on a world scale with a population which already reached over 100,000 by 1622 and was to be double that before the end of the century, and on the other Schoonhoven, Den Briel, Monnickendam, Medemblik and



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Aelbert Cuyp, *The Large Dort*, c. 1650, oil on canvas.

Purmerend, each with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants and decidedly more local economic functions. Between these extremes, however, were ten or more towns with populations of between 20,000 and 60,000, all with some claim to international economic roles. The towns also differed significantly in other ways: some, like the textile towns Leiden and Haarlem, were more dependent on manufacturing, while others relied more on trade, and their social structure varied accordingly. The textile towns had large populations of skilled workers who were now economically dependent on the merchant entrepreneurs who controlled cloth production, while the trading towns had a greater number of seamen and dockworkers. There were also significant differences in the range of services available from town to town. Only the largest towns could provide a full range of services: for example, only Leiden had a university, though Amsterdam and, later, Rotterdam had illustrious schools which provided similar educational services. (Outside Holland universities were also founded at Utrecht, Franeker in Friesland and Groningen.) Even the smallest of the towns had a respectable range of basic religious, educational and transport services, but more specialist needs were catered

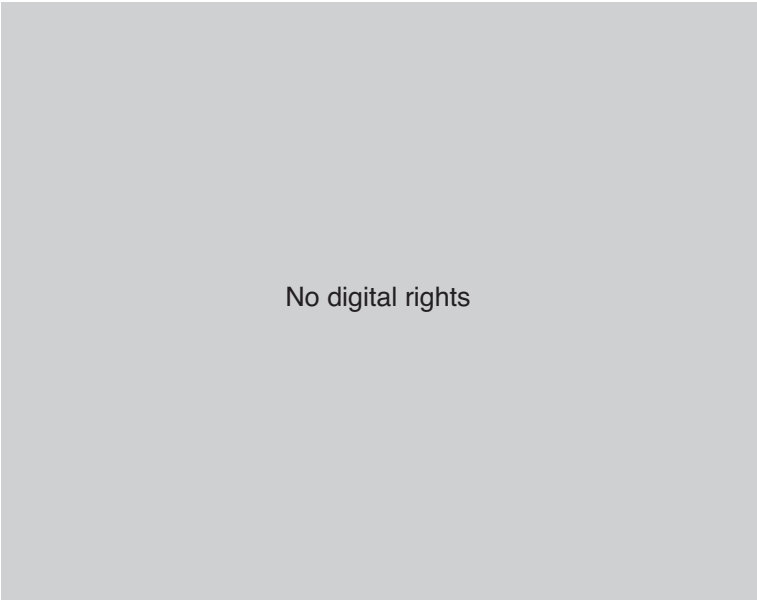
for only by the larger towns. Short distances and good communications meant that it was not too difficult for inhabitants of the smaller towns – and of the countryside as well for that matter – to access the services only available in the bigger centres. However, the size and nature of the urban sector of the province is far from being the whole story; in some ways the most important social as well as economic change took place in the countryside of Holland.

If the change in the towns was not so much in social structure as in size relative to the total economy, the same was far from being the case with the rural sector in Holland. Here the transformation was fundamental in terms of both economic and social structure, and the cultural implications must have been far-reaching. Something little short of an agricultural revolution took place in Holland between the late fifteenth and the middle of the seventeenth century without which the phenomenal growth of the province's economy would not have been possible.<sup>3</sup> Agriculture became thoroughly market oriented, specializing in what brought the best prices and could be produced most efficiently in the prevailing conditions. Most of Holland was not particularly suited to the production of bread grains and instead farmers turned to dairy farming and the raising of beef cattle, branches of farming that suited the nature of the land and which found ready markets not only in the growing towns of the



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Salomon van Ruysdael, *View of Deventer*, 1657, oil on panel.



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Meindert Hobbema, *Haarlem Lock, Amsterdam*, c. 1663–5, oil on canvas.

province but also further afield. Butter and cheese in particular became a lucrative part of the Dutch export trade, selling on quality rather than low prices. (It is significant for the way the Dutch were perceived in seventeenth-century Europe that it was widely believed that they saved the best dairy products for export while contenting themselves with much poorer stuff.) This specialization and concentration on the market brought about fundamental changes in the social structure of the countryside of Holland. The average size of farms grew and smallholders were almost entirely squeezed out, but at the same time the demand for rural artisan and transport services rose. Dairying and the raising of beef cattle were less labour intensive than mixed farming, and it became more efficient for farmers to look to the market to supply goods and services it was no longer efficient to provide themselves. Transport services also became vital not only to carry what the farms produced to the market but also to supply their consumption needs. The result of these changing circumstances was the development of a rural service sector in the villages: shopkeepers, small-scale traders, a wide range of craftsmen, skippers and barges, barber-surgeons, teachers and the like. In effect the villages

became smaller versions of the towns with a very similar social structure. Indeed, the distinction between town and village became political and juridical rather than economic in the case of the larger villages with populations approaching or even surpassing those of the smaller towns. Places like De Rijp and Graft, not to mention the agglomeration of villages along the river Zaan, which became the most important ship-building centre in the whole Republic, were towns in all but name, but even the smaller villages displayed something of the economic and social diversity usually associated with towns.

So, on the one hand, a sharp social divide developed in the rural sector between capitalist farmers and the – largely landless – agricultural labourers they employed, but on the other there was the rise of a rural bourgeoisie living off the prosperity of agriculture in the province. These economic and social changes meant that the social structure of the countryside became much more like that of the towns. If the expansion of the towns involved relative growth without significant structural change, the modernization of Holland's agriculture involved a transformation of rural society. Not the least important part of this transformation was the spread of urban economic values to the countryside. The commercial farmers of Holland were clearly just as much a part of an economic system dependent on the market as were the merchants and manufacturers in the towns; similarly, there was a rural bourgeoisie as well as semi-skilled workers and farm labourers. The expansion of the towns together with the spread of the market to encompass the agricultural sector meant that a form of culture which had previously been largely confined to the towns now began to dominate the whole of Holland.

However, the triumph of urban culture was perhaps less complete and certainly less rapid than might have been expected. The continued prestige of the nobility, for example, even in Holland demonstrated that traditional social and political values still had considerable weight,<sup>4</sup> while the social and economic teachings of the Reformed Church were sometimes difficult to reconcile with the workings of an essentially capitalist system. Clearly, there remained within Dutch society, even in Holland, powerful cultural forces which were at best uneasy with, and at worst actively hostile to, the new world of the Dutch economic miracle. Dutch Calvinists were far from eager to embrace the spirit of capitalism. There was, perhaps

inevitably, a time lag between the reality of economic change and the general acceptance of its cultural implications. The strength of traditional values was more evident in the early years of the seventeenth century, but Dutch culture never became entirely homogeneous and the triumph of the new was never complete. One of the most fascinating aspects of the Dutch Republic at this time was the overlap of old and new, traditional and capitalist, which is observable as much in a political system which clung desperately to precedent to disguise the innovatory nature of how it actually operated, as in a literature which strove to hymn conventional – and markedly anti-commercial – cultural values in the midst of the most successful capitalist economy in Europe. Opposition to the increasing domination of secular and commercial priorities came from various quarters and for various reasons, from concern at what was regarded as the relative neglect of religion to fears that the maintenance of proper social hierarchy was at risk. The clash between these conflicting value systems was further complicated by the fact that European culture as a whole was still largely under the hegemony of noble values and religious priorities, and the inhabitants of the Republic through education and trade contacts were wide open to influences from the rest of the continent. In addition, the economic and social changes which so profoundly affected the province of Holland were felt to a much lesser extent in the rest of the country.

The maritime region outside Holland – particularly Zeeland and Friesland – experienced a weaker version of the economic and social upheaval in the leading province, but in the land provinces the situation was very different. Here the economic and social developments of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries contrasted sharply with those of the maritime region. Although the land provinces seem to have kept abreast with the maritime region up to the middle of the sixteenth century, after the outbreak of the Revolt their economies stagnated at best and certainly lost out relative to Holland. In part at least this was because the Eighty Years War was largely fought on the territory of Gelderland, Overijssel and North Brabant after about 1576 whereas Holland hardly saw any military action on its own soil after the first decade of the war. Increasing competition from the towns of Holland, and Amsterdam in particular, undercut the international trading role of the

IJssel towns and reduced them to largely local significance, and the great Holland boom sucked in a steady stream of migrants from this region. After 1648 peace brought a brief period of economic growth to the area but this was interrupted by the French invasion of 1672 and had petered out by the end of the century. In economic terms the Golden Age passed the land provinces by.

As a result, the economic and social structure of these provinces remained very much as it had been on the eve of the Revolt. In marked contrast to Holland, the relative size of the towns failed to increase though the region as a whole was already quite highly urbanized by contemporary European standards. In the rural sector, although agricultural production changed in response to the pull of the Holland market, a smallholding peasantry persisted and nobles continued to control a far higher proportion of the land than in Holland. It seems also that farmers in this region tended to respond to the challenges of the time not by striving for the greatest profits but by trying to avoid disaster. In contrast to the specialization of agriculture in Holland, farmers in the land provinces tried to deal with the uncertainties of the market (and the weather) by combining the production of grain, especially the hardy rye, with keeping some sheep and cattle. This seems to hold true for the region as a whole despite significant local variations. In the Over-Betuwe (in Gelderland), for example, the farmers proved notably responsive to market conditions and moved heavily into tobacco-growing in the second half of the century. They also concentrated on wheat rather than rye, but stuck determinedly to mixed farming as their way of dealing with economic uncertainties.<sup>5</sup> Also in contrast to the situation in Holland, the nobles retained much of their economic and social power, and this was also evident in the greater influence they wielded politically. In Utrecht, Gelderland and Overijssel the balance of power between the towns and the nobility in the provincial states was more or less even, and in general the political influence of the nobles as a group was much greater than was the case in the maritime region. The peculiar political status of North Brabant (as a Generality land with no representation in the States General) meant that it was ruled from The Hague, so it is hard to gauge the potential power of the nobles here, though it seems that one of the reasons why Holland opposed allowing the truncated province back

into the States General was that it feared the extent of the influence that the princes of Orange could mobilize there.

So economic conditions and social structure changed far less in this region than in Holland, and it might be expected that traditional culture might be more resistant to change as a consequence. There is some evidence to suggest that there were significant cultural differences between the land provinces and Holland in particular, though it must be remembered that the two regions of the Republic were not hermetically sealed off from each other, that communications throughout the country were good, and distances even by the standards of the time were not great. Holland had an enormous influence on the rest of the Republic in all areas of life, including culture. With regard to art and literature the works which define the Golden Age were largely produced in Holland. With the possible exception of Utrecht, there was no rival to the influence of Holland as far as painting is concerned, and it would probably not be inaccurate to refer to the Holland rather than the Dutch School of art. Similarly, the tone in literature was set by the leading province, and the literary tastes cultivated in Holland were spread throughout the Republic by networks of writers as well as through published works.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, more than minor differences existed and persisted. One sharp divide was between the nobility and the rest of the population: throughout the Republic they remained endogamous, indeed to such an extent that they were failing demographically by the end of the Republican period. Nobles did not intermarry with even the regents of their own provinces, and certainly not with the regents of Holland, who were at least their equals in other respects than descent. The regents may have come to regard themselves as something of an urban nobility but, however much some of them might take on quasi-noble titles, they were certainly not seen as such by the authentic Dutch nobility. Another very noticeable difference was the persistence of Catholicism in North Brabant. By the time the Republic was able to take full control of this area it had undergone what proved to be a very effective counter-Reformation, and its population remained overwhelmingly Catholic subsequently. More subtly, there is evidence that the land provinces were distinctly less tolerant of religious minorities – and not just Catholics – than was the case in Holland, and it is not hard to link this to the more



conservative social and political attitudes prevalent there. On another cultural level it would seem that traditional beliefs and ways of experiencing the world remained markedly stronger in the land provinces than in the maritime region. The varied history of witchcraft prosecutions in the individual provinces of the Republic offers an instructive indication of such deep-seated differences.

It has long been a commonplace of studies of the Dutch Golden Age that it avoided the horrors of the early modern witchcraze. Although there is a great deal of truth in this statement, it is also far enough from the whole truth to be seriously misleading. Prosecutions for witchcraft effectively ceased in Holland and Zeeland by the beginning of the seventeenth century and Friesland too was largely free of convictions in such cases by this time, but elsewhere in the Republic sporadic trials and even convictions of supposed witches continued until around the middle of the century. Moreover, even in Holland, the ending of successful witchcraft prosecutions did not mean the end of belief in the reality of witchcraft; as was the case elsewhere in Europe – though rather later – belief in witchcraft continued to be orthodox long after prosecutions ceased. The persistence or weakening of witchcraft beliefs and the continuation or cessation of prosecutions for this and related offences can tell us a great deal about the nature of Dutch culture at this time. In particular, it is evident that reactions to, and belief in, witchcraft varied widely from province to province and even place to place. Traditional systems of belief were stronger in some areas than others, but even in Holland the conviction that witchcraft really existed was slow to fade. Notably, the Reformed Church continued to regard denial of the existence of witches and of the reality of Satanic influence in this world as a challenge to the essential truths of Christianity and indeed as tantamount to atheism. Yet in the end prosecutions ceased everywhere, so it may well be that while belief in witchcraft persisted the intensity of the fears and apprehensions it provoked weakened. People may have continued to believe that witches could exist, but they were perhaps less and less likely to see them as an immediate problem in their lives and so feel the need to do something about them.

Prosecutions for witchcraft had never been very common in Holland and Zeeland, and the belief that witches were worshippers of Satan who had sold their souls to the devil had never taken

hold of either the learned or the popular imagination. The decisive moment came, however, in 1592 when a ruling by the supreme court of appeal (*Hoge Raad*) for the two provinces effectively made successful prosecution for witchcraft impossible. Throughout Europe successful prosecution for witchcraft depended on the liberal use of torture. Under the systems of law prevailing in most of Europe, the use of torture was strictly controlled and could only be used to extract a confession when strong evidence of guilt had been established by other means. Had this rule been properly enforced everywhere the witchcraze could never have gained momentum, but the exceptional nature of witchcraft – exceptional in the seriousness of the threat to society it represented, and in the fact that by its very nature evidence of witchcraft rarely amounted to more than heaping suspicion on suspicion – led to a general and fatal relaxation of this rule. The decision of the *Hoge Raad*, however, reasserted this restriction on the use of torture even in witchcraft cases and, as in practice strong enough evidence never existed, enforcement of this ruling brought witchcraft prosecutions to an abrupt end. In the same decade the validity of ducking in water as a test to find out if someone was a witch was also definitively rejected; subsequently only a confession obtained without duress could hope to lead to a conviction. With one exception after 1600 no more witches were condemned to death in the two provinces, and trials for witchcraft soon petered out.<sup>7</sup> Prosecutions for witchcraft had never been frequent in Friesland or Utrecht, and here too such trials had in effect ceased by the beginning of the seventeenth century. The situation in the rest of the Republic was not dissimilar, and after the first years of the Golden Century trials for *maleficium* – doing harm by magical means – had largely disappeared from the Dutch courts.

The issue of witchcraft, however, did not totally disappear, but came up in cases of slander. Throughout most of Europe it was dangerous for someone accused of witchcraft to pursue a charge of slander through the courts, as such cases could all too easily turn into a trial of the accuser as a witch. In the Republic it became not only possible but safe to retaliate legally against such damaging accusations. Perhaps the way in which the local councils of the Reformed Church dealt with accusations of witchcraft among the faithful was an even more unambiguous sign of radically changed attitudes. In

Amsterdam, at least, such serious accusations were treated not as indications that the accused might possibly be witches, but in the same way as any other serious dispute between members of the Reformed congregation. Here the church council tried to restore harmony rather than investigating claims of witchcraft. The quarrelling parties would be visited by the elders and admonished to settle their differences and subjected to disciplinary measures – such as exclusion from communion – until they did.<sup>8</sup> What is perhaps as surprising as the attitude taken up by the church council is the fact that this approach seems to have worked, which suggests that here at least witchcraft accusations were a part of a range of insults specific to women rather than evidence of deep-seated suspicions or fears. So despite the persistence of the idea of witchcraft, the disciplinary system of the Reformed congregations seems to have assumed that calling a woman a witch was a sign of personal animosity rather than evidence of *maleficia* that needed further investigation.

However, while the importance of such changes should not be underestimated, they should not be taken to indicate that people had ceased to believe in witches or to fear the activity of the devil – or the Antichrist – in this world. Throughout Europe witchcraft trials ended long before belief in witches became regarded as mere superstition by the educated. What seems to have changed in the first instance is that magistrates and the courts, particularly at the highest levels, became convinced that those being dragged before them and accused of witchcraft were sick or deluded rather than actually being witches. Christianity might well be under constant demonic threat, but persecuting such wretched creatures was a dangerous diversion from dealing with the real enemy, as well as an inhumane perversion of justice. Throughout the sixteenth and for much of the seventeenth century apocalyptic expectations shaped the thinking of both Protestants and Catholics. It was believed that the final battle between Christ and Antichrist was imminent, and the perceived increase in the activities of witches was seen as an attempt by the devil to undermine the true church of Christ in preparation for the final battle. While the great humanist Grotius began to undermine the scriptural basis of such millenarian visions – and the Protestant identification of the pope as Antichrist – in the 1620s by his reinterpretation of the Book of Revelation (as a lament about the

persecution of Christians at the time it was written rather than as a prophecy of the apocalypse), millenarian movements continued to flourish and reached a peak of popularity just after the mid-century. Sceptical views regarding the reality of witchcraft were put forward in this period, but they made rather little impression until the last years of the century.

So the *Hoge Raad* and the courts following its lead in Holland and Zeeland were not denying the reality of witchcraft and similar satanic activities, but were insisting that proper procedures be followed to protect the innocent and the majesty of the law. That this stance led to the effective end of witch trials was an unintended, and probably unexpected, consequence of this legal rigour. It is clear not only that popular witchcraft beliefs persisted but that such views were in broad terms shared by the civil authorities and the educated in general. However, the idea of the Satanic pact made little impact on either popular or educated opinion in the Republic. This was the idea that witches not only wielded harmful magic but that they had sold their souls to the devil and flew by magical means to worship him with vile ceremonies at Black Sabbaths. The concept of the Pact turned witches into heretics and enemies of the Church, and also provided a particularly vicious dynamic to the witchcraze, with the accused being tortured until they confessed that they had attended sabbaths, and then further tortured until they named other people they had seen at these meetings. These in their turn were tortured to name yet others, and in this way trials could snowball uncontrollably into major witchcrazes. This peculiarly dangerous form of witchcraft belief never took hold in the northern Netherlands and, as was the case in England (though not Scotland), witches were tried for *maleficia*, not heresy, which limited the danger of prosecutions escalating into epidemics.

Popular ideas concerning magic and witchcraft in the Republic during the seventeenth century seem to have continued much as they had been before the invention of the Satanic pact and the placing of witches within a millenarian schema in the late fifteenth century. The central concern was that witches were believed to be able to do harm through supernatural means. Given the high level of infant and child mortality – around a quarter of children did not survive their first year and a further quarter did not reach maturity – it is hardly

surprising that there was a lot of anxiety surrounding childbirth and the welfare of young children. In the countryside witchcraft could be held responsible if butter failed to churn, or for a whole host of other farming problems, large and small. The pattern of suspicion – often built up over a number of years of accusation and mutual recrimination – persisted, but now the judicial system was steadily withdrawing itself from taking cognizance of such cases. Trials, particularly notorious cases, inevitably encouraged the persistence of belief in witchcraft; their absence may have dampened down such fears. In any case perhaps the crucial point is that, despite what their neighbours might have thought or feared, suspected witches were no longer persecuted – legally at least. However, the refusal of the legal authorities to act was not necessarily because they regarded popular beliefs regarding magic as mere superstition, though they may well have thought that the mass of the population were sadly unaware of the proper Christian interpretation of, and reaction to, such matters.

The essential difference between the broad range of popular magical beliefs and educated opinion was the religious and meta-physical context in which magic was placed. For much of the seventeenth century the prevalent view – in the Republic as much as in the rest of Europe – was that the universe was ruled by spiritual forces. Astrology sought to show how the movements of the stars and planets – the macrocosm – influenced or even determined matters on earth – the microcosm. Natural disasters, such as plagues and famines, were occasioned by sin; they were God's just punishment for a sinful society. Similarly, personal misfortunes could be seen as divine chastisement or, rather more positively, as a test of one's faith. So the world could, and must, be interpreted in spiritual terms, and such powers could derive only from God – or the Devil. In the context of this spiritual interpretation of nature, it was perfectly rational to believe that witches might be able to exercise magical powers; the problem was that since these powers did not come from God, they could only come from the Devil, whether the witches were aware of it or not. Indeed, from the orthodox Christian point of view it was heretical to deny the influence of the Devil in this world. Theologians may have disagreed about the nature of that influence, with some arguing that his powers were simply illusions, but that he was a constant presence tempting the faithful away

from the true path of salvation was not in dispute. (Legally, of course, this distinction was of vital importance: if the powers granted to witches were illusory, then they could not do real harm and so could not be convicted of *maleficia*.) The Reformed Church in the Republic, in common with the other Reformed churches in Europe, continued to regard belief in witchcraft as necessary to orthodoxy, and when Balthasar Bekker dared to question this aspect of the church's teachings his ideas were declared to be heretical by the synod of North Holland. Bekker was a minister of the Reformed Church in Amsterdam but his *De betoverde wereld* (The Bewitched World), first published as late as 1691, outraged orthodox opinion, despite the relatively mild nature of his argument. He sided with those who argued that since the coming of Christ the Devil could have no real power in this world, and that the church had more pressing pastoral challenges than pursuing the illusory harm done by supposed witches. However, his opponents suspected – rightly – the influence of Cartesian rationalism in his work and this philosophical approach was perhaps seen as a more general threat to religious orthodoxy than his particular views on witchcraft. So right until the end of the century the Reformed Church continued to insist that belief in witchcraft and, more generally, the very real temptations of Satan in this world, were an essential part of the true Christian faith. The great difference between Dutch attitudes to witchcraft and those prevailing in much of the rest of Europe was the failure of the idea of the Satanic pact to take hold; otherwise they shared the general fear of the power of the Devil. For much of the the Golden Age most of the Dutch continued to live in what has been called the magical universe.<sup>9</sup>

If the weight of intellectual opinion in the Republic in the early seventeenth century was clearly on the side of those who emphasized the reality of the threat that witchcraft posed to Christianity, the situation had changed decisively by its final decades. New ways of understanding the world were emerging in the early modern period, and the seventeenth century can be seen as a crucial stage in the process of replacing one world-view with another. If this century did not quite see the end of the magical universe, it at least unmistakably marked the beginning of its end. The Republic played a major role in this transformation, both through its own innovations and

through its readiness to pick up and disseminate ideas from all over Europe. This was not just a matter of the rise of a new science, though Christiaan Huygens, Jan Swammerdam and Antonij van Leeuwenhoek made significant contributions to this movement. The achievements of such scientists were only part of the story; it seems a much broader shift of perception was taking place in the Republic in the later seventeenth century. One aspect of this was that the Book of Nature was no longer to be read through the Bible, but was to be taken as an independent source of divine revelation foreshadowing the natural theology which was to be such a characteristic element of the Dutch Enlightenment.<sup>10</sup>

Such radically changing perspectives were even evident in the early years of the century in the work of those Dutch humanists who pioneered new ways of interpreting the Bible, basically by subjecting the text to linguistic analysis and reading it in historical context. Such apparently innocent academic endeavours proved unexpectedly dangerous to theological positions that had been generally accepted up to this time. While placing Revelation in a historical context put in question the extent to which it could be regarded as a prophecy, the admonition 'Thou shalt not allow a witch to live' lost much of its relevance for contemporary demonology by the revelation that this was at best a misleading translation of the original Hebrew term. Later the early and enthusiastic adoption of the methods of the French philosopher René Descartes threatened to subvert the philosophical underpinnings of conventional theology, which were still basically Aristotelian. Reformed orthodoxy was also challenged in the later seventeenth century, not only by the continued vitality of Remonstrant thought in the writings of Philip van Limborch and Jean le Clerc and others, but also from within the Church by the relatively liberal theology of Cocceius and his followers. The philosophy of Spinoza proved an even more corrosive challenge to established ways of thought, with its combination of a Cartesian method with a profound knowledge of Jewish scriptural exegesis.

In many ways the combination of these potentially, and in some cases actually, radical ideas in science, philosophy and even theology justifies labelling the last decades of the seventeenth century in the Republic the early Enlightenment. Yet it needs to be emphasized that the old world still lived on, and remained powerful. The Cocceian

movement seemed at one point likely to lead to as serious a rift in the Reformed Church as the Remonstrant/Contra-remonstrant divide of the early part of the century. This crisis was averted but the hard-line Calvinists remained powerful – Bekker after all was expelled from his post by the classis despite the support of the Amsterdam town government. Spinoza was careful about what he published during his lifetime, and needed to be. His ideas stirred up enormous controversy, and his posthumous works were eventually banned by the civil authorities and publicly burnt. The ultimate triumph of the new ways of thought and perception should not disguise the fact that their supporters were an often embattled minority for much of the century, though they were clearly gaining ground by its last years. A further complication is that many of the proponents of the new ideas were not conscious subverters of the old order. They continued to be, with the exception of Spinoza and some of his more radical followers, believing Christians and saw no necessary clash between faith and reason. Astrology continued to be intellectually respectable until quite late in the century, and millenarian movements were particularly active in its third quarter. The magical universe survived in the perceptions of the majority of the population, though it was beginning to lose its hold on the educated.

The inexorable rise of the modern at the expense of the traditional is, however, not the whole story. It is also important to stress that throughout the century the old and the new co-existed, not always peacefully. Attitudes to witchcraft beliefs are an example of deep and deepening cultural divisions within Dutch society, and can be best seen as an aspect of a broader conflict between a burgeoning urban culture and a traditional belief system rooted in a rural and pre-commercial society. The relative strength of the old and the new varied from region to region, place to place, group to group, and generation to generation. In a commercial society the market was a more immediate concern than witchcraft, and for the majority of the Dutch population economic survival was the overriding concern. As dairy farms became large-scale commercial operations serving not just a domestic but also an international market, the failure of butter to churn became an economic and technical rather than a spiritual problem. Yet the old ways and mores remained powerful, and there was no shortage of warnings about the dangers of losing



touch with true spiritual values. It took time for Christian moral teachings to adjust to capitalism.

The conflict between a capitalist ethic and the pre-commercial values inherent in Christian moral teachings is dramatically illustrated by the controversy which burst out in 1638 in reaction to the treatises on usury published by a professor at the university of Leiden, Claude Saumaise (Salmasius). The Dutch Republic was the strongest economy in Europe by the fourth decade of the seventeenth century, and this success was firmly based on trade, commercial farming and manufactures. Borrowing and lending money at commercial rates of interest was an indispensable function of such an economy, and Amsterdam was the most important financial centre north of the Alps, if not in the whole of Europe. The Dutch state, too, could not survive without borrowing, and the States of Holland accumulated an enormous debt in the course of the Eighty Years War. So not only Dutch wealth but the very war against Spain which the Reformed Church saw, in part at least, as a providential struggle against the Antichrist was dependent on commercial borrowing and lending. Yet the same church that supported the war condemned as usury the loans which financed it. All Christian churches at the time held to the traditional view of usury as exploitation of those in need – as anyone having to borrow money was by definition in need, and it was a contravention of true Christian morality to exploit the weak. Of course, money continued to be borrowed and interest to be paid, and a whole range of devices were employed to disguise this fact. There were even official limits in some countries on the rates of interest that could be charged, but in principle the churches continued to condemn usury as un-Christian. The new Protestant churches arising from the Reformation did not dispute this part of the theology of the Catholic Church, and shared to the full its unease with regard to lending money at interest. The practical theology of the Reformed churches may in some ways have been more in tune with capitalism, but the Dutch Reformed Church found it difficult to adjust to at least this aspect of the capitalist system.

Salmasius published his *De usuris liber* in 1638 and followed it up with a further two publications on the same subject. In these works he deployed a wide range of humanist learning to justify taking interest

on loans on what might be thought to be the obvious grounds that the lender remained the owner of the money lent, and was thus justified in expecting compensation for being unable to make use of it during the period of the loan. The situation did not seem so straightforward to many of Salmasius' contemporaries, and the publications caused a considerable stir, with opposition coming from jurists as well as theologians and ministers of the Reformed Church. Partly this reaction was because Salmasius was challenging a body of opinion, encompassing both law and theology, which was result of centuries of argument on this contentious issue, and both lawyers and theologians had vested intellectual interests resting on their command of the minutiae of this controversy. However, the views of Salmasius, although unorthodox theologically, were hardly radical enough to explain the furore they caused, and Grotius, the most important Dutch legal thinker of his generation, seems to have inclined to a similar opinion on the issue, though he expressed himself rather more circumspectly.<sup>11</sup> A more plausible interpretation of the controversy is that it was an expression of a deep-seated unease in Dutch society with regard to the increasing dominance of a commercial culture which threatened to subvert traditional mores and values.

When the Utrecht lawyer and humanist Arnout van Buchell was appointed as his province's representative on the board of the Amsterdam chamber of the VOC in 1619, he came face-to-face for the first time with the ethos of Dutch commercial capitalism in all its naked glory – and he experienced a profound culture shock.<sup>12</sup> Admittedly, he was a somewhat curious character – a Catholic who converted, perhaps reluctantly and certainly rather belatedly, not just to the Reformed Church but to its Contra-remonstrant wing, it would seem as much for the sake of social cohesion as through religious conviction. He was steeped in the culture of Renaissance classicism and was brought up with aspirations to nobility which could never quite be realized, and he became one of the most noted antiquarians of his time. His unease at the aggressive capitalism of the Dutch Golden Age is understandable in this context, and is a reminder that not all those with a humanist education were able to find the values of a commercial society a comfortable fit. It is tempting to see Van Buchell as an unrepresentative throwback, but that

would probably be a mistake. Rather he should be seen as a representative of one form of resistance to the mores of the age, combining nostalgia for a noble culture and humanist values with a Christian morality ill-inclined to make compromises with the needs of a commercial society. He was born in 1565, went to Leiden University, where he trained as a lawyer, and married well (in terms of wealth). He was thus an adult by the beginning of the Golden Age, with little direct contact with the world of the Holland economic boom up to that point. Particularly in the early decades of the seventeenth century, there must have been many others whose age, education and social position made them profoundly uneasy with the cultural changes of the time.

In this period the best education, reserved in the main for the sons of the social and economic elite, was considered to be the intensive study of the classics, either at a Latin School or with a tutor at home. In either case the underlying rationale of this form of education was that it was the best preparation for a leading role, politically and socially, in early modern society. The successful student would emerge with a thorough knowledge of the written culture of the late Roman Republic and early Empire, and be fluent enough in classical Latin to write elegant verse in the language. Ancient Greece and Rome were considered to have been the great peak of human civilization, and so the repository of the wisdom required to live a good and useful life. It is hard to find any sense that such an education might not be entirely appropriate to the changed world of seventeenth-century Europe, even with regard to religion, where the discontinuity might seem most glaring. The culture of the classical Roman world was pagan and so the fit with the uncompromisingly Christian culture of early modern Europe would seem to be far from perfect, and it is one of the more intriguing aspects of the period that contemporaries do not appear to have found this apparently obvious mismatch a serious problem. They read classical writers through Christian spectacles, and this ability to assimilate classical culture almost effortlessly to Christianity must be seen as one of the most remarkable achievements of the Renaissance. However, one characteristic of classical culture that could not be ignored was its profound distaste for trade, and indeed any form of moneymaking other than agriculture. This was the literature of a social elite which may have

lived in cities but based its wealth and status on landownership. Such values fitted in well with those of the nobility of medieval and early modern Europe, but were far less compatible with the capitalist society that was developing so rapidly in the Dutch Republic. It is very much the question how far the values implicit in classical literature affected the social and political elite in the Republic; the paganism of the classical tradition may have been transmuted with surprising ease into a mode compatible with Christianity, but it is far from clear that its belief in the moral inferiority of trade could be brushed aside with equal facility. Van Buchell's distaste for the materialist culture of Amsterdam may not have been as alien to the contemporary Dutch ethos as appears at first sight.

About a year before the publication of Salmasius' book on usury caused such disquiet among self-appointed moralists, the sudden collapse in the price for tulip bulbs became the occasion for another major outburst of concern over the changes which were taking place in Dutch society. The rapid inflation and then collapse in the prices of tulip bulbs has become a notorious early example of the speculative bubbles that periodically afflict capitalist economies with a form of near-insanity, and was described at the time and since in the most lurid of terms. However, the contemporary accounts of waves of bankruptcies, personal misery and social upheaval seem to have been considerably exaggerated, to say the least.<sup>13</sup> Interest in the cultivation of tulips and attempts to produce ever more exotic strains of the flower had developed in the late sixteenth century in the Netherlands, and was associated with trade in bulbs almost from the beginning. The tulip became fashionable in the early seventeenth century, but the cultivation of, and trade in, the plant remained largely restricted to a relatively small group of specialists called *bloemisten* by contemporaries. Trade in bulbs could slip almost imperceptibly into a form of futures trading, because in the nature of things bulbs had to be left in the ground for a good part of the year. A fever of speculation hit the market for tulip bulbs in 1636 and peaked at an auction at the beginning of the following year, with enormous prices being offered for particularly prized specimens. The bubble burst soon afterwards and prices fell rapidly and drastically, but actual losses seem to have been much less than rumours at the time claimed. Most of the bids at the peak were in the form of

promises to pay when the tulips were lifted, and with the collapse of the marker buyers sought – and found – ways to back out of their contracts. While some outsiders had been drawn in at the height of the speculative fever, most of those involved were *bloemisten*, and in the end matters were settled within their ranks. The widespread refusal to honour contracts caused a degree of ill-feeling within the group, but within a few years the *bloemisten* were exchanging and trading in tulips much as before, though probably with a greater measure of circumspection. However difficult it may have been for those most closely involved to deal with the crisis, most of the *bloemisten* seem to have been able to limit their losses, and there was in fact no great wave of bankruptcies. The damage caused to the wider Dutch economy seems to have been decidedly limited.

The concerns voiced about the tulip bubble seem to have been not so much economic as moral. Tulipmania served as a symbol of what many felt was going wrong with Dutch society, in particular the way that aggressive capitalism was felt to be undermining the value system that was at the heart of social stability. In the first place critics regarded the very high prices paid for mere flowers to be a sign that society was losing its sense of proper value, and that such a high regard for material goods was distracting attention from spiritual and religious priorities. The tulip craze was also seen by these commentators as a potential threat to social stability. It was said that weavers abandoned their looms – one of the centres of the tulip trade was Haarlem, a centre of textile manufacture – in the hope of becoming rich through the speculation in bulbs. The image of weavers aping their betters and trying to gain higher status by money alone symbolized the threat to the established social hierarchy represented by the explosive economic growth of the period. The expansion of trade and manufactures of the first half of the century brought wealth, but also disturbed the balance between old and rising elites. In Holland in particular the growth in the size and political importance of the towns tended to sideline the nobility, and offered entrepreneurs the prospect of a more rapid economic and social ascent than had been readily possible in the past. In general, the social change which inevitably accompanied the economic boom must have left many feeling disorientated in a society where both social and moral norms were in practice being challenged, if not

undermined. Certainly not all benefited from the changes which were taking place. Smallholders practically disappeared from the countryside of Holland, skilled workers in the textile industry were losing their economic independence and coming increasingly under the control of merchant entrepreneurs, and there were losers as well as gainers in the cut-throat world of Dutch trade. Contemporary ethics showed distinctly limited understanding of the dangers inherent in the dynamic economy which brought so much obvious success, and merchants or manufacturers who went bankrupt were regarded as being morally suspect rather than as mere victims of economic vicissitudes. More generally, while many were visibly prospering, the boom certainly did not eliminate poverty. A majority of the population probably had to call on poor relief at some points in the normal course of their lives, even without the effects of the periodic slumps in trade.

If the bubble of speculation in tulip bulbs could be represented as an instance of the false values which were seen to be infecting Dutch society, its collapse was a striking example of how fragile this new-found wealth could be, and so was also grist to the mill for moralists. Not only was it wrong for a Christian to place too great a value on material possessions, but such wealth was all too often ephemeral. The rich man might not only find it difficult to gain entrance to heaven, but he might also find his house was built on sand. Of course, the dangers of too great a concern with the things of this world, as opposed to preparation for the next, was a trope with a long history for Christian theologians and moralists, so railing against the pleasures and seductions of this world was nothing new. What is interesting in this context is the sense of a collective malaise: it was not so much that sinful people needed to be reminded what their priorities should be, but that the changes that were taking place in Dutch society were themselves at best morally dubious and at worst were opening up the possibility of divine retribution on a collective, not an individual, scale. Such social critics – some but certainly not all were ministers of the Reformed Church – were still living in an universe where spiritual causes were paramount. God's favour had brought victory – or at least partial success – in the war with Spain and the wealth which had made it possible; if the Dutch turned away from God and worshipped instead the golden idol of

economic success then what had been given to them could also be taken away. This was not the embarrassment of riches<sup>14</sup> but the fear of God's punishment, collective and individual, which was still felt at this time to be inherent to Christianity.

The adverse reaction to Salmasius' modest defence of taking interest on loans, the fears of economic and social disruption occasioned by the tulip bubble and its collapse, and Van Buchell's profound unease in the thrusting world of Amsterdam's colonial trade are all symptoms of the difficulty many contemporaries found in adjusting to the new society that was emerging in the first half of the seventeenth century. Conventional Christian ethics and traditional social values were perceived as being at risk, though in the long run it would seem that both were rather more resilient than these Jeremiahs feared.

The very public controversy over the question of usury and the pamphlets commenting on the tulip bubble are typical of the relatively open nature of Dutch society as far as the public discussion of controversial issues was concerned. This has been called a discussion-culture<sup>15</sup> and it is certainly true that the Dutch were able to express their opinions on a wide range of topics and did so frequently and often at great length, both through the spoken word and in print. These discussions took place in private houses, bookshops – where they often centred round recent publications – and later coffee-houses, as well as more publicly in pamphlets and books. There were distinct limits on freedom of expression: while there was little check on what was said in private, in public discretion was needed as far as sensitive religious and political issues were concerned. Even private conversation was not entirely free, and there are cases of prosecution or attempted prosecution against people expressing what were felt by the authorities to be seditious statements. On the other hand the fact that the content of such supposedly treasonable discussions leaked out at all suggests that in these cases they were not entirely private. There were distinct limits as to what could be expressed in public and especially in print, and these were in the main well understood. Although the Republic was relatively tolerant in respect of religion, and this was especially true of Holland, some views were clearly beyond the pale. Blasphemy and atheist opinions in print were suppressed where possible, and contemporaries had a

pretty broad definition of both – any questioning of the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, was regarded as a species of atheism, and so Socinians had to be circumspect. This does not however seem to have dampened enthusiasm for the discussion of such matters in less public ways. Such relatively free discussions – in private, in formal and semi-formal groups and in print – were among the most characteristic and dynamic forces in Dutch culture at this time, and were in marked contrast to the considerably more restricted societies in the rest of contemporary Europe.

Holland was at the heart of this discussion-culture, not only because it was the most populous and wealthy of the provinces, but also because religious tolerance was in practice greater here than elsewhere in the Republic. The land provinces seem to have been much more inclined to enforce a form of Reformed hegemony on public and cultural life, and the smaller scale of urban life and the power of nobles and rural notables in the countryside made such policies at least feasible, if not necessarily successful. In Holland, in contrast, the towns were both larger and more numerous and the police apparatus available to the regents remained rudimentary. The chief police official, the bailiff (*baljuw*) or sheriff (*schout*), of even the largest town had only a handful of officers at his disposal and had to rely heavily on aid and information from his fellow citizens. Town governments could call in the help of the local militia, but this was a clumsy instrument at best, and was in any case recruited from the middling ranks of urban society and so was not an unreflecting tool of authority. Moreover, the notorious independence of the towns, both large and small, made it almost impossible to impose a single set of standards for the province as a whole. In and after the First Anglo-Dutch War, the *Gecommitteerde Raden* (commissioned councillors – the executive committee of the provincial States) of Holland tried to extradite a citizen of Rotterdam on a charge of seditious talk but the local court refused to cede jurisdiction, and rather tamely the most powerful authority in the province (outside the States of Holland itself) had in the end to accept an apology from the miscreant. The Rotterdam magistrates were probably primarily concerned to defend the town's autonomy, but there is a suspicion that they may have had at least a little sympathy with the Orangist rantings of the accused. All town governments shared a dislike of public criticism of their own activities



but, as this example demonstrates, they could be much more tolerant of attacks on the policies of the central authorities in province and Republic if they fitted in with their own political stance.

So it was in general not easy to track down and punish those who confined themselves to expressing their ideas in speech. A notable exception was the case of ministers of the Reformed Church who could be, and sometimes were, disciplined by the government of their town if they voiced unacceptable opinions in their sermons. Ministers were paid salaries out of public funds administered by the civil authorities, and so were peculiarly vulnerable to sanctions from the governments of their towns, and sermons in the public church where the magistrates sat in a prominent pew would be seen as an especially direct challenge to the civil authorities. In the main, however, as long as people were reasonably circumspect as to how they expressed their opinions they were in practice unlikely to face prosecution or other serious sanctions. Publishing opinions which might be considered subversive of the established order in religion or politics was a different matter, and the Republic – even Holland – was far from being as free from censorship or from the danger of prosecution for unwelcome opinions as has sometimes been claimed.

However, there were ways of minimizing the risks attached to the publication of controversial material. In the first place, the sheer number of printers in the Republic, and especially in Holland, made it much more difficult to trace the printer of suspect material than was the case anywhere else in Europe. Publishing was a major industry in the Republic, both for internal consumption and for export, and everything from flysheets to scholarly editions of classical texts and hand-coloured atlases rolled from the presses. Leiden was the great centre for the publication of scholarly texts and Amsterdam was particularly well supplied with printers and publishers, but the other Holland towns had enough printers to make it a less than straightforward task to pin down who had printed a particular pamphlet or broadsheet – unless the printer was foolish enough to put his real name on the publication. It was common practice to try to evade detection and punishment by the use of false or fictitious imprints when publishing matter likely to attract prosecution, and the limited investigative resources of the civil authorities meant that it was difficult for them to track down the responsible printer without

substantial help from the public, which was not always forthcoming. In the towns of Holland people were crowded together, and it must have been nigh on impossible for printers to keep what they were doing entirely secret; in most cases many must have been aware of who was publishing, or at least printing, material likely to be condemned, but few seem to have been inclined to inform the authorities. There are even cases of the *schout* or one of his assistants warning, for whatever reason, a printer about a forthcoming raid by the police, thus allowing him time to get rid of any incriminating material. So, although there were distinct limits on what could be published openly, such restrictions probably applied much more to books than to pamphlets. There were two levels of discussion in the Republic: one was conducted through books published, usually, under the author's name; the other was by means of more ephemeral material and by word of mouth, and was by its very nature much less restricted as to what it was possible to say without incurring the danger of severe repercussions. Publications on the first level enjoyed considerable latitude, more than was common elsewhere, but nevertheless a certain degree of tact was advisable with regard to religion and politics. The second level was much freer in practice, at least in part because of the sheer inefficiency of the repressive apparatus at the command of the civil authorities.

The relative freedom of religious association in the Republic encouraged the discussion of radical ideas in theology and the exploration of new forms of worship. The Remonstrants, once they had accepted their expulsion from the Reformed Church after the Synod of Dordt, were able to set up their own churches. While their membership was never particularly high, the Remonstrants proved a respectable haven for the highly educated and those from the solid upper bourgeoisie who were repelled by the cramped orthodoxy of the official church, and possibly also by its intrusive congregational discipline. Many of the leading liberal Protestant theologians of the later seventeenth century were Remonstrants. The various Baptist groups were also prominent in the religious ferment which was a permanent feature of Dutch life during the Golden Age, though they tended to disagree with each other at least as much as they did with outsiders. Already at the beginning of the century they were divided into sub-sects of varying rigour in discipline and inflexibility in

theology, and a tendency to schisms, bannings, secessions and anathemas continued to be a characteristic of the Baptists as a group. In the decades after the middle of the century, leading Baptist figures such as Galenus Abrahamsz. de Haan were drawn into the theological controversies occasioned by the impact of Cartesian philosophy, Spinoza's theologico-political writings and the influence of such charismatic sectarians as Jean de Labadie and Antoinette Bourignon, not to mention the radical ideas filtering in from England during the period of the Civil War and Commonwealth. In this atmosphere the Collegiants attained a new prominence as a locus for the discussion of the implications of the new ideas that were in circulation. The Collegiants were neither a church nor a sect: they had no fixed theology and no set membership. No one could be expelled for heresy, as there was no orthodoxy to define what heresy would be; and in any case, there was no membership, in the sense that was understood by churches and sects, and therefore no possibility of excommunication. They are hard to pin down ideologically as the colleges seem to have differed in character from place to place, with some being more spiritual and others more intellectual in tone. Like the Quakers in England they had no set services but rather meetings at which anyone could speak. Each college was free to run its meetings as it wished, and it is possibly better to regard these gatherings as discussion groups rather than religious services. All seem to have been welcome to their meetings with the significant exception of Catholics, and loyal members of the Reformed Church would have been self-excluding. In this context the importance of this peculiar movement is that it is a prime example of the form that discussion of radical ideas could take in the Republic, and also of the freedom within Dutch society, which allowed such associations to flourish at least for a time.

Of course, those involved in such radical religious movements were also linked to a broader exchange of ideas through personal contacts, other more or less formal discussion groups, encounters in bookshops and, later, coffee-houses. This oral level of the discussion inspired, and was in return fuelled by, a print culture consisting of a stream of pamphlets, books and, in the last decades of the century, learned periodicals which brought together and disseminated new ideas from all over Europe. The wealth of pamphlet literature – a

surprising amount of which survives considering its essentially ephemeral nature – provides a fascinating commentary on Dutch life in the Golden Age. Although the production of pamphlets and broadsheets was a permanent feature throughout the century, the number published increased enormously during periods of political crisis – notably during the height of the Remonstrant/Contra-remonstrant controversy, during the *rampjaar* of 1672, and at the time of Willem III's intervention in England in 1688–9. Publications varied from satirical prints with rhymed commentaries to almost book-length pamphlets, and from crude plays on popular emotions to appeals to reason. How this material should be interpreted is a matter of some disagreement among historians and, rather than looking upon it as a crude measure of public opinion, it is probably better to suggest that it only provides an insight into the thinking of those who wrote and read pamphlets and books, from disgruntled conservatives to fervent devotees of the new. Pamphlets, of course, were meant to influence rather than reflect public opinion and were produced by the highly literate for the instruction of the literate, and there are no satisfactory ways of assessing how they were received or even how popular individual publications were. Part of this output, of course, was open or disguised propaganda from town or provincial governments, or from the entourage of the *raadpensionaris* or prince of Orange, and representatives of Reformed orthodoxy also seem to have been very ready to put their opinions forward – and not just on religious issues. What is important in this context is that there was a constant flow of printed comment and argument throughout the century, but that this should be read as only a part of a much wider discussion at all levels of Dutch society. The civil authorities regarded the consideration of political issues as their business alone, but in practice they were unable to suppress or control political debate despite their best efforts. They were even less successful in containing the discussion of other sensitive matters, though the authors of books had to be circumspect, as did the editors of learned periodicals – though those published in French or Latin were allowed rather more leeway than Pieter Rabus' *Boekzaal van Europe* (Library of Europe), which was published in Dutch. The remarkable degree of freedom of expression in Dutch society was not simply an indication of a relative tolerance, but also of the inefficiency of

the repressive apparatus rather than the lack of censorship and other legal restraints.

There is another sense in which discussion was at the heart of the Dutch experience at this time: institutions tended to be run by groups and not individuals, and decisions were taken collectively. This group structure is particularly evident in the organization and operation of the political system, but can also be seen in church councils and synods, and in the running of charitable and other public and semi-public institutions. The States General took collective decisions (with unanimity being formally required for important matters), delegated detailed discussion of policies to sub-committees and received their reports. The Dutch army was formally run by the Council of State, which acted in effect as a sub-committee of the States General (though its formal constitutional position defies easy definition), and the navy was under the direction of five admiralties, each directed by a group of councillors. The States of Holland similarly worked through discussion and debate, and here again important decisions were, formally at least, only arrived at unanimously. Votes were in the form of often lengthy opinions delivered by spokesmen for each of the towns, after which the *raad-pensionaris* tried to formulate an acceptable consensus. In the search for agreement the smaller towns tended to defer to the larger, at least in the second round of voting, which can perhaps be seen as a prime example of the realism which made it possible for a political system dependent on such collective decision-making to work. The government of the towns in Holland centred on councils of between fourteen and forty members, and local justice was dispensed by a court of seven, nine or eleven *schepenen* (aldermen). Indeed, so strong was this ethos of collective responsibility that whereas council minutes usually simply record such-and-such a decision as being made, when 'unanimously' (*met eenparigheid van stemmen*) was added it seems to indicate that there had been serious disagreements within the council before the collective decision had been finally reached. Town governments were led by *burgemeesters*, usually four in number, who similarly made decisions together. Town delegations to the States of Holland usually consisted of a number of regents but had only one 'voice' – but as they were bound by the instructions of their principals this is perhaps less significant. This collegial mentality had its

limits, however, as while the boards of some public bodies, such as charitable institutions, commissioned group portraits, town councils did not. Church councils and synods also seem to have felt no need to perpetuate their meeting in paint; perhaps to have done otherwise would have seemed to show too much un-Christian pride.

Between the purely private and the semi-public and public forms of this never-ending discussion were a wide variety of groups, from loose circles of friends to associations with more or less formal meetings for debate.<sup>16</sup> In Rotterdam these latter ranged from the inevitable groups of religious radicals to societies of Huguenot noblewomen (unmarried and widowed) who had come to the Republic as refugees from persecution in France in the later years of the century. If the latter were hardly typical in their composition and aims, they can serve as a reminder that the high level of immigration throughout the century meant that it was not always clear who should be properly considered as Dutch at any one time. German, French, English and especially Netherlanders from the South all made their contribution to the Dutch Babel. The English Quaker Benjamin Furly was the focus of one of the circles of friends in Rotterdam, and a variety of refugees from the political and religious turmoil of the Civil War and Commonwealth lived for a shorter or longer time in the Republic, bringing their garrulous and incurably quarrelsome habits with them.

Visible and lasting evidence of this marked predilection for acting in groups of one sort or another rather than individually is provided by the popularity of group portraits. The officers of the local militias, the syndics of guilds and the regents of charitable institutions had themselves portrayed together to commemorate their public role, indicating the importance they placed on this collective activity. However, although paid for by those depicted, such paintings became the property of the institution rather than the individual, and it must be stressed that single and family portraits were produced in much greater numbers. The Dutch habit of acting in groups in politics and public affairs in general did not mean that their individuality was swallowed by the collective, except perhaps in the sense that no one could stand alone. For the vast majority of the Dutch, survival in the harsh conditions of life prevailing at this time required the support of family and friends at the very least, and often help from the wider

community – from their guilds, churches or at worst from municipal poor relief. It is also worth noting that the need for collective display did not reach the higher level of politics. Town councils, provincial states, the States General did not commission group portraits of their members: perhaps the regents in such bodies had more effective means of self-validation.

Debate and discussion was a defining characteristic of Dutch culture in the Golden Age and, despite the undoubted limitations on what it was safe to say in public or to publish, the extent of freedom of speech and publication was in practice greater than elsewhere in Europe. However this relative openness was much more evident in Holland than in the rest of the Republic. The greater size of the towns, more intense trade contacts with other countries, the higher level of immigration and the greater concentration of printers and publishers combined to make the leading province a fertile ground for new ideas and approaches in religion, philosophy and science. Descartes developed his radical philosophy during his time in the Republic, where he found eager disciples – as well, of course, as fervent opponents among theologians who discerned a threat to the philosophical underpinnings of orthodox theology. Later in the century, two of the most subversive thinkers – in very different ways – came from immigrant groups: Spinoza from the Jewish community of Amsterdam, and Pierre Bayle from the Huguenot diaspora in Rotterdam. The towns in the land provinces lacked the economic dynamism of their Holland counterparts, had negative migration rates and were considerably easier to police, though the influence of the intellectual ferment in Holland, given the ease of communication within the country, must have been considerable.

This discussion culture produced challenges to conventional thinking in religion and philosophy which, together with the so-called scientific revolution, have been seen as marking the advent of the modern world, or at the least the beginning of the Enlightenment. The new science in particular has been seen as, if not an enemy of religion, a source of knowledge independent of the Bible and theology, and as a prime contributor to the secularization of the modern world. At first, and indeed at second, glance it seems absurd to look for the roots of secularization in a society as religion-drenched as was the Dutch. This was a profoundly Christian country and it found

little difficulty into assimilating the new science into its religious world view – the Book of Nature became a second source of divine revelation alongside the Bible, and the mechanical universe of the new physics was seen as requiring a divine clock-maker. Nevertheless, as long as the term is not defined too narrowly, there is a sense in which this period marked a decisive move towards giving a higher priority to secular considerations in both politics and society.

In politics, whether at Generality, provincial or town level, secular values prevailed over religious concerns. The overriding priority of the civil authorities was the maintenance of order and the welfare of the economy. Although the regents at every level were members of the Reformed Church, and though that church had a privileged position within the state, there was never any question of making church and state co-extensive, as it was nearly everywhere else in Europe at the time. Conventional political theory argued that the prime purpose and justification of political authority was the preservation and protection of the true church; governments, whether princely or republican, were necessary to discipline sinful humanity as a consequence of the fall from grace in the Garden of Eden. So the determination of European states to wipe out heresy and enforce religious orthodoxy within their borders was a consequence not just of the belief that dissent in religion was a serious threat to political unity, but also of the conviction that this was their sacred duty. Moreover, a community which tolerated heresy brought upon itself the danger of divine punishment, and so in this view religious intolerance was not just right but also decidedly expedient. The civil authorities in the Republic may have shared such views in theory, but from the very beginnings of the new state in the 1580s their actions spoke clearly of a quite different set of priorities. For a variety of reasons the regents refused even to attempt to impose a single religious orthodoxy. First of all there was revulsion against the intense persecution suffered by Protestants under the Spanish regime in the Netherlands before the Revolt, and the serious disruption to civil society and to the economy that this had entailed. Then there was the argument that persecution was not only wrong but ineffective, as it could only enforce outer conformity and not produce inner conviction. Most of all, however, some degree of toleration was a practical necessity. At the time of the effective foundation of the Dutch Republic in the 1590s, only



a minority of the population were Protestants, and many of these were Anabaptists rather than members of the Reformed Church. The majority of the inhabitants of the new state seem to have been either undecided or more Catholic than anything else. Also the regents themselves were not religiously homogeneous at first: until the Synod of Dordt they included Catholics and Protestants who were not members of the Reformed Church and, of course, the conflict between Remonstrants and Contra-remonstrants further confused the issue in the early years of the seventeenth century. In such circumstances and in the middle of a war for survival against Spain, intolerance was impractical – but it was probably not wanted by many people outside the leadership of the Reformed Church in any case.

After the Synod of Dordt all regents were supposed to be members of the Reformed Church, and this was increasingly the case in practice as well in theory. However, by this time it was clear that the Republic was a religiously pluralist society and that the costs of trying to change this would be too high, socially and economically. The civil authorities at town and provincial level were primarily concerned with the maintenance of peace, order and prosperity, and their actions show that they were willing to sacrifice religious unity in pursuit of these ends. The Reformed Church enjoyed a privileged position, though at the cost of an often uncomfortable degree of political interference in its activities, but it was never able to secure a monopoly on religious services to the Dutch population. Catholic worship was formally banned, but being a Catholic was not, and the numerous and frequently strengthened laws and regulations against Catholic activities failed to prevent the Church from reorganizing itself very effectively in the course of the first half of the seventeenth century. Non-Reformed Protestants had full civil rights – as indeed did the Catholics – and in practice freedom of worship, though the legal status of their meetings was not entirely clear. This limited but very significant degree of religious toleration was in the main a pragmatic reaction to a situation that could not easily be changed rather than being the result of belief that it was good or right, though it would seem that to some extent an abhorrence of persecution had become hard-wired in Dutch culture. On the other hand, the limits to such toleration were to some extent set by majority opinion rather than by the will of the oligarchy; although Catholic worship was being

tolerated in practice by the later seventeenth century, the laws against it had to remain in place to satisfy the prejudices of the majority of the population. In any case the regents to a large extent shared these prejudices, though town regents were in the end happy to allow the creation of Catholic poor-relief organizations as they promised to relieve civic welfare services of a considerable burden. So although the regents in the main regarded the Catholic Church as an evil institution – though the idea that it was a tool of the Antichrist was fading in the later seventeenth century – and were happy to perpetuate the laws suppressing its activities in the Republic, they were nevertheless in the end prepared to allow Catholics to worship together as long as they were discreet – and willing to pay for the privilege. Such attitudes were based, whether consciously or not, on an essentially secular attitude to the function of government: to maintain peace and harmony within society, to uphold the law and to promote the economic health of the town, province or country under their direction.

In practice it seems clear that the civil authorities at both local and provincial level were consistently prepared to sacrifice religious purity to such essentially secular aims. The central government probably did not have the will, arguably did not have the authority, and certainly did not have the power to force the provinces to give religious purity a higher priority. It is true that there were significant differences between provinces, with Holland being notably more secular in orientation and the land provinces allowing a greater political and social weight to Reformed orthodoxy, but taking the Republic as a whole it is nevertheless clear that not only did the regents consistently adopt pragmatic policies, but that the ends such policies were intended to serve were essentially secular in nature – peace and prosperity rather than the glory of God.

The foreign policy of the Republic was also primarily secular and pragmatic, though the Dutch perception of European realities was unavoidably influenced by religion. In essence, up to the final peace with Spain in 1648 the Dutch sought to win their independence, and subsequently their main focus was economic until the French attack in 1672 brought survival as independent state to the fore once more. For the greater part of the century the strategic situation in Europe meant that the Republic needed Catholic allies to achieve its ends: France during the war against Spain, then Austria and Spain against

France. Protestant states were either too weak to provide the necessary support or, in the case of England, more likely to be hostile, despite what might have been seen as common religious interests. However, this pragmatic approach to foreign policy did not go unchallenged and there were many inside and especially outside the regent elite who argued for a much higher priority to be given to religious considerations. The opposition to the signing of the Truce with Spain in 1609 was in part at least motivated by the fear that this marked the abandonment of the providential purpose of the Dutch state. Dutch success against the apparently overwhelming might of Spain, it was argued, could only be explained by it being according to God's will. The struggle against Spain was part of Christ's struggle against the Roman Antichrist and thus it was the religious duty of the Dutch to continue the war, or risk the wrath of God. In this context, Oldenbarnevelt's continued favouring of Catholic France instead of Protestant England as an ally, however justified it may seem in retrospect, could not but look suspicious, and distrust of his foreign policy played a significant part in his downfall in 1618. Later in the century belief in the providential purpose of the Dutch state seems to have weakened, or at least to have become a less important element in debates over foreign policy.

After the final peace with Spain in 1648, Dutch foreign policy was largely concerned with the needs of the economy and with the strategic problems caused by England and France. In both cases the issues arising were primarily secular: changes of regime and even more frequent changes of policy made England a permanent problem, and the military power of France began to appear, especially after the shock of 1672, to endanger the very existence of the Republic as an independent state. However, religion could never entirely be ignored in seventeenth-century Europe and Catholic France came to be seen as a threat to the survival of Protestantism in Europe, especially after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes and the subsequent flight of French Protestants. Belief in a great Catholic conspiracy to bring down Protestantism in England and then in the rest of Europe was widespread and dominated Dutch reactions to the intervention in England in 1688, though it does not appear materially to have affected Willem III and his advisers. Religion in danger was a useful slogan, but only for internal consumption as the Republic could not afford to alienate

potential Catholic allies; whatever their private beliefs, Dutch statesmen had to remain pragmatic. Perhaps reason of state dominated the policies of all states at this time and the Dutch were simply more blatant in their pursuit of secular ends. After all, France had been willing to support the Dutch against Spain during the Eighty Years War and to intervene on the Protestant side in the Thirty Years War in pursuit of what were felt to be the fundamental interests of their country. The priority the Dutch gave to economic concerns was, however, unique. All governments were to some extent concerned with increasing their wealth, but as a means of strengthening the state, whereas serving the needs of the economy was for the Dutch an end in itself. Already in the negotiations for the Truce in 1609 the interests of the VOC in trade with the Indies were declared by the States General to be national rather than sectional concerns, and similarly Dutch trade was a central issue in the talks leading to the Treaty of Nijmegen in 1678, much to the confusion of the French, who could only see such considerations as reflecting the influence of particular interest groups. The power of Holland within the Dutch political system ensured that the good of the economy would remain a major concern of foreign policy, though the war against Spain first and then the struggle to curb France had to be given primary importance. The trade-off was never entirely straightforward: Dutch trade and manufactures produced the money to support the Republic's military and naval efforts, and so there was a limit to the extent to which the economy could be sacrificed for strategic ends.

This was not, nor did it become, a secular society in the modern sense: the Dutch Republic was and remained profoundly Christian. What did emerge from the forced confrontation with religious pluralism was a largely neutral, or at least non-denominational, public space. The core aims of Dutch government at all levels were essentially secular: town and provincial governments gave priority to the preservation of internal harmony and the welfare of the economy; the central government strove pragmatically for survival in a world where it could not afford the luxury of a religiously inspired foreign policy. Such approaches to the task of government could also build on the powerful urban tradition of communal solidarity, which was the positive side of the particularism which pervaded the political system. In most of Protestant Europe the new faith was able to establish a monopoly

and became a vital part of national identity; in the Dutch Republic the Reformed Church failed to establish a monopoly, and so for communal solidarity to survive it had to be divorced from religion. The public space thus created was not an entirely level playing field: the Reformed Church had a much louder voice than the other Protestant groups, and the Catholics remained to an extent on the margins, partly because it was felt they could not be entirely loyal to the Dutch state as long as they owed allegiance to a foreign power. The consolidation of this relatively neutral space was helped by the rise of liberal theology, arguing for a form of Protestant ecumenism which, together with the influence of Descartes and, less widely but more radically, Spinoza in philosophy helped to usher in an early Enlightenment which was sceptical of inherited dogmas. On another level, the triumph of the market economy undermined traditional Christian social ethics, and brought its own pragmatic and secular values to the fore.

The story of the Dutch Golden Age is usually told in terms of economic dynamism and cultural innovation, but resistance to the resultant social change and weakening of traditional values is perhaps an equally important aspect of Dutch life in this period. The narrow dogmatism and ethical conservatism of the Reformed Church cannot be dismissed as mere obscurantism, and its alternative world-view as expressed in the *nadere reformatie* was not without its own dynamism. Also the unease of many at the rapid economic and social developments that were taking place was not soothed by the almost seismic shifts in values that accompanied them. It is worth remembering at this point that the great achievements of the Dutch School in painting passed many cultured contemporaries by. They were too attached to criteria of artistic worth stemming from the Renaissance to see in Rembrandt, for example, anything more than an accomplished colourist who was unfortunately lacking in true artistic taste. There were indeed profound cultural divisions in Dutch society during the Golden Age, and this is partly what makes it so interesting.

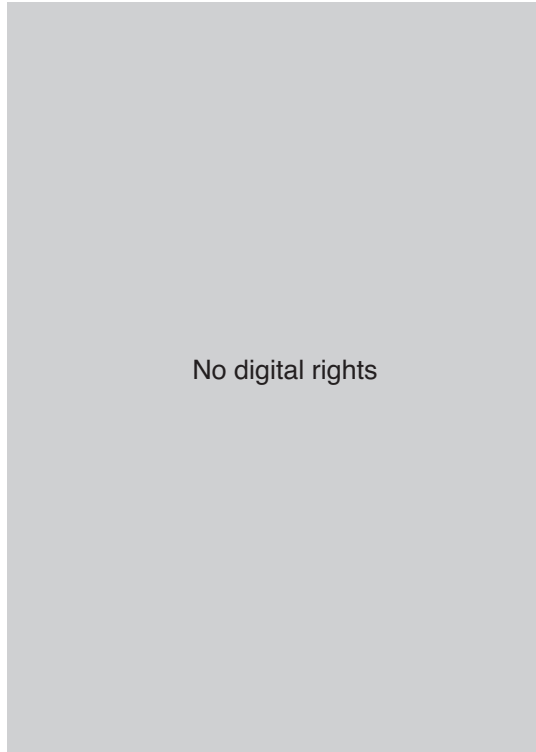
### 3

## The Shape of Dutch Culture

The confrontation between old and new in the culture of the Dutch Golden Age, between inherited modes of perception and action and the brave new world of emergent modernity, was far from a straightforward drawing-up of clear battle lines. This was not a cold war nor yet peaceful co-existence, as there were no fixed sides. The same person could be an innovative scientist and yet concerned to reinvigorate rather than replace religion; a magistrate reluctant to bring to trial the wretched creatures accused of being witches could still believe in the reality of witchcraft; and a ruthless entrepreneur could be a devotee of a classical civilization which despised trade and all those involved in it. To accept the new in one area of culture did not necessarily entail embracing it in all, and only very late in the century did the early Enlightenment bring with it the idea of general progress – and even this could be associated with a marked conservatism in some areas of culture. Society was in flux, and the culture of the period reflected the individual and collective stresses that resulted. Most people clung to the security of what they were used to when they could, and accepted change when they had no alternative. While the day-to-day struggle to survive was the overwhelming concern for the mass of the population, the society in which they had to live and work was changing. Such changes may have been most evident in economic terms, but the provision of poor relief, the treatment of orphans and the possibility of salvation were vital concerns and were essentially cultural constructs – and they were also changing.

The Renaissance had been the major cultural force for change in Europe from the late fourteenth century onwards, but by the beginning of the seventeenth century its impetus was fading, and a movement which had been innovative, in fact if not in intention, was

A 1640s engraving  
of P. C. Hooft.



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beginning to be more concerned with preserving what had been achieved than with further development. The great task of the rediscovery of ancient civilization had, it seemed, largely been achieved and it was time for consolidation. Humanists were first of all philologists, but the heroic days of textual criticism were over by this time: the works of the main ancient writers had been satisfactorily edited and published, and in the main only rather minor textual issues remained unresolved. The works of the ancients were mined for their wisdom, and this reverence for the classics made this aspect of the Renaissance necessarily backward-looking. The truths to be found in the classics were believed to have universal validity, and the aim of a humanist education was to encourage people to follow these values in both private and public life. As those who could afford it ensured that their sons enjoyed the benefits of such an education, either by sending them to a Latin school or by means of a private tutor, the effect must have been to make the social and political elite

averse to change and innovation to a significant extent. More particularly the disdain for trade evident in classical literature must have encouraged a retreat from trade by those with the means to do so. The son of the powerful Amsterdam regent C. P. Hooft retreated from both trade and town politics to live a quasi-noble life as *drost* (sheriff) of Muiden. This was the poet and dramatist Pieter Cornelisz. Hooft, who was probably the most prestigious cultural figure of the Republic in the first half of the century. The suspicion that making money through trade was fundamentally ignoble may also have contributed to the retreat by regents from active involvement with trade and manufactures that appears to have taken place later in the century. On the positive side the message that public service was better than the pursuit of personal gain provided the political elite with what was in many ways an admirable ideology, but such attitudes may also have encouraged the tendency among the regents to consider themselves distinctly superior to their fellow citizens.

It seems unlikely, however, that attitudes and perceptions stemming from an education available only to the wealthy had much of an effect on the mass of the Dutch population. Potentially much more influential were the religious beliefs and practices brought in by Protestantism in its various forms. The Reformed Church, with its privileged position, had the aim of bringing the Dutch people as a whole to live in accordance with its understanding of godliness. How far it succeeded is hard to tell. At the beginning of the century only a small minority of the population were members of the Church but far more attended its services and so came under its influence to some extent – though whether the customary long sermons had more of a negative than a positive effect is impossible to say, and no doubt the impact varied with the skill and eloquence of the preacher. In the course of the century membership of the Church grew and with it the impact of congregational discipline, though there is some evidence to suggest that as the size of congregations grew the severity of discipline fell.<sup>1</sup> Expansion beyond the ranks of the wholly committed evidently had its price. Nevertheless, however lukewarm the faith of most of the members of the Church may have been, they were exposed Sunday after Sunday – for attendance seems to have been high – to the teachings of the new church, and it cannot have failed to have had its effect. Of course, when assessing the cultural influence of the



Reformed Church it has to be remembered that a significant portion of the population remained Catholic, or returned to the old church by the middle of the century. Also the teachings of dissenting Protestants have to be taken into account, and the Mennonites certainly made a distinctive contribution to Dutch culture in the Golden Age.

What all the Christian churches and sects had in common was a social ethic which was fundamentally opposed to capitalism, or at least was profoundly uneasy with the values implicit in the booming economy of the period. If the various churches were not as disdainful of trade as were the writings of classical antiquity, they were nevertheless troubled by a society that seemed to worship Mammon rather more fervently than their God. A prime example of the difficulty the Reformed Church in particular had with the practices of a highly commercial society was the stance all too many of its self-appointed champions took on the issue of lending money at interest. This refusal to bow to economic reality suggests that there was nothing inherently favourable to capitalism in the Reformed brand of Protestantism, despite the persistent efforts of historians and sociologists to find such a connection.<sup>2</sup> The Reformed shared the social ethics common to Christians at this time, which were still far more appropriate for a pre-commercial society than the capitalist economy that was developing throughout Europe in the early modern period – and most strongly in the Dutch Republic. Religious disapproval does not seem to have hindered the growth of the Dutch economy in any significant way, though the rampant capitalism of Holland may have sharpened the distrust of the other provinces for their overbearing ally.

Protestantism did bring some changes which had the potential for quite profound cultural effects. For Protestants the ideal Christian life no longer involved a rejection of this earthly life. Monks, friars and nuns served God by turning their backs on this world and concentrating on preparation for the next. A celibate priesthood, although a rather late and often poorly observed modification to the practice of the early church, also implied a denial of the ties of family, which were a vital tool of survival in pre-modern society. In contrast, Protestants insisted that everyone had a calling – not just priests or monks – and that calling was to serve Christ through living their normal lives in accordance with His wishes. Protestant ministers married not out of concupiscence, but to demonstrate their integration into society; they

were not a separate order but, like doctors and lawyers, part of the educated professional section of the bourgeoisie. The duty of ministers was to preach the Word, but all the faithful were called to the service of God in the course of their more mundane lives and work. According to the Reformed Church in particular, the believer's life should be one of disciplined service with no room for frivolous amusements and the pursuit of worldly pleasures. The aim of the Church was to create a truly godly society in the Dutch Republic, but this project was doomed from the start as religious pluralism blunted the Church's disciplinary powers: the Republic would not become a new Geneva. Yet this attempt to reform society along properly Christian lines ran parallel to a more general concern to civilize the mass of the population, at least in the sense of curbing violence, drunkenness, and what was seen as sexual license. Such attempts to reform the lives of the population seem to have had a very limited effect, but the new concept of what constituted a truly Christian life had an indisputable importance for the development of Dutch culture in this century.

Another area where Protestantism brought significant changes in perception was charity. In the past the function of charity had been as much to serve the spiritual needs of the donor as the physical needs of the recipient, but the Reformed doctrine of predestination meant that no amount of charitable giving could ease the soul's passage to heaven. Charity remained a Christian duty, but was now focused on the careful and responsible distribution of resources; indiscriminate largesse was out, and the idea of the deserving poor was in. Begging was discouraged and charity funnelled through civic and church bodies, though the balance between the two varied from place to place. What persisted was a strong sense that helping those in need – the poor, the sick and orphans – was a fundamental Christian duty. In general it can be said that while social welfare within this increasingly capitalist economy was certainly discriminating in intent, it was largely free of the inhumanity which so often perverted poor relief in later industrializing societies. Local authorities sought to exclude scroungers and feared that if they were too liberal they would attract ne'er-do-wells from elsewhere, but otherwise there seems to have been little tendency to blame people for their poverty.

The extent to which Protestantism and the Reformed Church in particular changed the way the Dutch understood the world in

which they lived remains uncertain. The devotees of the *nadere reformatie* – a movement to encourage exceptional personal piety – may have striven to devote their lives to disciplined service of Christ, but there is little to suggest that the behaviour of the population as a whole changed significantly. The Church's attempts at indoctrination may, however, have speeded up the transformation of a shame into a guilt culture, that is, from a culture where the honour of the individual and family in the face of the rest of society was paramount, to one where actions were judged by the individual's conscience in the face of God. Living in accordance with God's will was more important for the Reformed faithful, in theory at least, than what other people thought. In the event, urbanization and economic change were probably more important in bringing about this change. A reputation for personal integrity was still vital for success in commerce in this period, and honour certainly played its part here, but so did apparent religious rectitude. Perhaps much to the chagrin of the Reformed, Mennonites did particularly well in this respect as, despite their principled refusal to swear oaths, they had the firm reputation of always keeping their word. This example is a reminder that the religious pluralism of the Republic makes it particularly difficult to trace the cultural impact of any one spiritual trend: the influence of the Reformed Church may have extended to a majority of the population by the middle of the century, but the increase in numbers seems to have weakened congregational discipline and coherence, and it must not be forgotten that perhaps as much as a third of the total population of the Republic was still, or had become, Catholic by that point. The Reformed Church was the official church of the new Dutch state, but the extent of its influence on Dutch culture seems to have been distinctly limited.

The Golden Age was also a period of a fundamental change in how the world was understood. The magical universe was in the process of being replaced by a modern, scientific world in which explanations would be sought in material forces rather than in spirit or magic. This momentous transformation was already under way by the beginning of the seventeenth century and was far from complete by its end, yet sufficient had changed to justify the claim that the magical universe had finally come to an end, if not that a scientific revolution had taken place. There is admittedly the idea of a struggle

between magic/spirit and science but this is somewhat anachronistic, as the pioneers of the new learning were not consciously attacking religion, and were almost without exception practising Christians. The full implications of the scientific advances made in the course of the century were not yet apparent, though this did not prevent self-appointed defenders of religion from issuing ever more chilling warnings of the dangers to faith and morals implied by such reckless activities. In retrospect, however, it is clear that the paradigm for understanding how the world worked was in the process of changing. In the magical universe causes were sought in spiritual, moral or magical influences: famines and other misfortunes were seen as punishments from God for sin, or as the consequences of human moral failings, and it was rational to believe that changes in the stars influenced life on earth. Astrology was a good example of this sort of thinking: the movements of the stars being seen as influencing or even determining what happened on earth by means of spiritual or magical forces. In contrast the new science was concerned with the interaction of physical forces which could be expressed with precision by mathematics. In this paradigm the universe was seen as a machine – often a clock – needing no invisible forces to explain its functioning (though to some sceptical commentators Newton's concept of an unseen force of gravity seemed suspiciously magical).

On a more obvious level, the discoveries in astronomy in particular were incompatible with the picture of the universe that could be, and was, inferred from the Bible, as well as challenging the authority of ancient learning. The increasingly convincing evidence that the planets, including Earth, orbited the sun shattered the conventional image of the universe as a set of concentric spheres, and at the same time deprived astrology of its rational base. The excitement generated by the progress of the new science seems to have obscured the fact that, in contrast to natural philosophy, it was incompetent to deal with the moral and religious meaning of existence. In other words science could tell why Newton's apple fell in terms of physics but could say nothing about its moral or religious significance. In the case of the apple this lack may not have mattered, but for personal misfortunes or collective disasters the inability of science to provide satisfactory answers could be deeply disturbing. Similarly increasing knowledge about the variety and complexity of insect life certainly

amazed contemporaries, but made it more difficult to draw religious messages from their example. Ants and bees could be understood as having the purpose of demonstrating to humanity the virtues of organization, obedience and hard work, but it was difficult to find a moral message in the astonishing variety of animal and insect life that was being revealed by men like Jan Swammerdam – unless it was the sheer profligacy of creation, and the implications of this could be distinctly discomfiting.<sup>3</sup> More obviously the scientific discoveries of the period, not least by Dutch physicists and naturalists, made clear the weaknesses of Aristotelian science, and played a major part in undermining the authority of classical learning.

To a large extent Dutch culture was an urban culture, both because of the high proportion of the population which lived in the towns and because of the cultural hegemony of Holland, which was by far the most urbanized of the provinces. It could be argued that, for Holland at least, the countryside with its market-oriented farming was in a sense an extension of the towns and very largely shared their cultural values. The physical characteristics of the towns were significant as far as their influence on culture is concerned: they were very densely populated, and the various social and religious groups within their walls lived in decidedly close proximity. A combination of the need to keep the population within the lines of the fortifications with the high value of agricultural land inhibited urban sprawl and the growth of suburbs. Towns did expand in area, but in all cases this physical expansion was modest compared to the rise in population. They were also changing through the beginning of the concentration of different social groups into separate sections of the town, for example with the creation of the concentric semi-circles of *grachten* (canals) lined with residences for the rich in Amsterdam, and in contrast the planning of a separate quarter for workers' cottages in Leiden. More usually, shortage of space meant that the different classes lived close together, with even the houses of regents opening up straight onto the street and not hiding behind high walls or hedges. Typically such houses would have a narrow frontage on a major canal, and find space by building high and long. Just round the corner from the imposing houses of the rich were side-streets with much more modest dwellings, though the very poorest sections of the population would be more likely to be found in the outskirts or in the docks areas

of seaport towns. The ubiquity of canals in the towns of the maritime region and the low-lying nature of the land on which towns were built made the urban experience especially distinctive.

Despite the growth of the population and the economic boom, this was not a period particularly marked by notable architectural projects. The well-to-do began to build country houses where their families could go for the summer, and by the later seventeenth century some of these were on quite a considerable scale. Also a number of towns rebuilt their town halls in a more impressive style – compare Saenredam's painting of the old town hall of Amsterdam with the impressive structure that replaced it on the Dam.<sup>4</sup> However, most of the new building was housing in the traditional vernacular style, marked by decorative gables and designed to make the most economical use of the limited space available. The great works of the time were very different from urban palaces or country mansions: they were the great drainage projects and the digging of the new canals needed for the passenger-barge network. This was not a monarchy, the nobility was overshadowed by the collective wealth of the towns, and there was only a limited amount of money available for prestige projects. Some new churches were built but mostly the Reformed Church was satisfied with taking over the existing church buildings, and the other Protestant churches and sects were content with less impressive places of worship. It is true that the Lutheran church and the Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam were imposing buildings, but they were both special cases in a sense, given the large number of Germans and Scandinavians in the town, and the unique nature of its Jewish community. Catholics everywhere, of course, had to keep their visible presence unobtrusive.

The physical context in which the Dutch lived changed considerably during the century and in many ways. The countryside was transformed by the great drainages and through canal construction and increasingly large-scale commercial farming; the towns, in sharp contrast, grew in size, but in other respects remained very much as before. Communications improved and the passenger-barges provided places where people from different social groups and various parts of the country could meet, even if only in the imagination of numerous pamphleteers. Movement of people as well as goods by water was easy by the standards of the time, and the ubiquity of

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Gerrit Berckheyde, *Market Place and Town Hall, Haarlem*, c. 1691, oil on panel.

printing presses and high levels of literacy produced boom conditions for the medium of the printed word. Oral culture, from sermons to coffee-house gossip, remained strong but fly-sheets and pamphlets provided a new dimension to public discussion of issues of concern, and the cramming of people together in cramped urban spaces produced a ready, and potentially volatile, audience.

Women are very visible in Dutch painting of this period, not just in domestic interiors but also on the streets, running market stalls, skating on ice and – if the non-too-subtle hints in the paintings have been read correctly – as prostitutes and procuresses. Yet women remain almost invisible as far as the culture of the Golden Age is concerned: a handful of painters, many poets but few of distinction, and a bluestocking or two. These are exceptions that perhaps prove the rule in what appears on the surface to be a very masculine culture. Yet Dutch women had a reputation for a degree of assertiveness that was often seen as distinctly unseemly by visitors to the country, and other evidence suggests that they were at least as visible in reality as in art, and rather less demure. Indeed, despite Christian insistence on the essential inferiority of women, Dutch society seems markedly

Pieter de Hooch,  
*Courtyard of a House  
in Delft*, 1658,  
oil on canvas.

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less instinctively misogynistic than was the norm for early modern Europe, yet it remains hard to find any distinctive feminine strand in Dutch culture in this century.

Women were to a large extent second-class citizens socially, economically and legally, and this situation inevitably weakened their ability to shape the culture around them. Education for girls at every level of society was inferior to that available for boys. Everywhere in the Republic literacy rates were lower among women than among men, though they were nevertheless considerably higher than elsewhere in Europe. Literacy rates are usually measured by the ability to sign documents rather than making a mark, and this is very imperfect evidence, but indirect sources suggest that literacy rates were high and rising, even among women. Letters written to De Ruyter's fleet in 1664–5, for example, demonstrate that many of the wives of even common sailors were capable of writing their own letters, though in a standard form reflecting the examples they must have had to copy as children.<sup>5</sup> Little beyond this basic level of literacy and numeracy was available for girls, and even at the highest levels of society what was deemed suitable for them was very different from that deemed



appropriate for boys. At best girls might learn foreign languages, usually French, along with household management and other specifically female accomplishments. They were not brought into contact with the core of the humanist culture of the time, though they might read suitable classics in translation. There were certainly no Latin schools for ladies, and studying at university was completely unthinkable.

Women's education was so restricted because of the very limited, gender-determined roles they were expected to play, especially in public life. The learning obtained from Latin school and university was a preparation for the sort of life and career that was simply not open to women. They could not be doctors or lawyers, could certainly not be ministers of the church and, no matter how powerful or distinguished their family, politics at any level was closed to them (though the widow of Frederik Hendrik was a major force during Willem III's minority, as royal or quasi-royal families did sometimes challenge the prevailing gender codes). Despite such educational limitations, there is some evidence that women played a more active part in the creation and transmission of culture than their very slight presence in the literary and artistic canon might suggest. For a start women, and female children as well, were fully engaged in the economy: only in the higher social classes were they freed from the necessity of contributing to the family income. The families of unskilled or semi-skilled workers could not make ends meet without the income brought in by the wife (and children as soon as they were old enough to make a contribution), though the work available was usually poorly paid. For the artisan-trader the wife's work would include running the household, including the shop, and in the countryside the farmer's wife again was indispensable to the running of the business. Women were also prominent as street vendors and market traders, and prostitution was a major employer, especially in seaports. A high proportion of female immigrants ended up as domestic servants, and even quite modest bourgeois households would have at least one maid. Dutch women also had a reputation, at least among foreign visitors, for ruling their households and for a degree of freedom of action in public that was uncommon in early modern Europe.

Although it was still generally accepted that women were inferior to men both spiritually and intellectually, being more driven by bodily urges, and thus needing to be under male discipline, be it from

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Frans Hals, *The Regents of the Old Men's Almshouse, Haarlem*, 1664, oil on canvas.

fathers or husbands, there were at least the stirrings of a change in attitude and a recognition of their independent merits. Johan van Beverwijck's *On the Excellence of the Female Sex* (1639) argued not just that women were not inferior to men, but that they were superior.<sup>6</sup> There is an element of humanistic play in this book, as he deliberately uses the resources of classical learning to contradict received opinion, but there is no reason to doubt the seriousness of his belief in the potentialities of women. It is equally significant that he drew no social consequences from his argument: women, however gifted, were to remain in their domestic role and were not, despite their nurturing capacities, to become doctors. (Beverwijck was himself a doctor.) There were in fact a few public offices that were open to women: Frans Hals' splendid *Regentesses of the Old Men's Almshouse* is a reminder of this, and women were also needed to oversee the girls in the town orphanages. Women might not be able to become doctors, but most births were guided by private midwives, and the post of official midwife existed in some towns. These were public roles, but limited ones and gender-related. More intriguingly, the peculiar problem of the Catholic Church in the Holland Mission opened up the way for the *klopjes* to play a central role in the life of their community. These semi-religious women became indispensable to the

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Frans Hals, *The Regentesses of the Old Men's Almshouse, Haarlem*, 1664, oil on canvas.

organization and sometimes finance of the Mission, though their relative freedom from close clerical control caused not a little unease in the Catholic Church outside the Mission.

It remains the case, however, that the cultural reach of women's work was severely restricted by their position in society. While writing occasional verses might be considered a desirable female accomplishment, such compositions were unlikely to be regarded as proper poetry by educated men. Women lacked the necessary rigorous education – not to mention the intellectual capacity, it was thought – to satisfy contemporary criteria for poetic excellence. Consequently at best their work might be circulated in manuscript, but rarely published. As far as painting was concerned, professional painters were guild-trained craftsmen, and this was in the main not a world open to women. Of course many ladies sketched and painted, as these were suitable female accomplishments, but only a handful were able to reach beyond the circle of family and friends. The family was also the proper venue for the display of women's musical talents; playing and singing in public was not a respectable activity for ladies. It was possible for women to perform on the stage, though this was hardly considered by most to be a respectable activity. Moreover, the career opportunities were very limited through the



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Judith Leyster, *The Merry Drinker*, 1629, oil on canvas.

lack of regular theatres outside Amsterdam – and even in Amsterdam there was only one, the Schouwburg. The social penalties for performing in public were also considerable for both men and women. The Reformed Church was not alone in regarding acting as an unacceptable profession, and women were even more vulnerable to the loss of respect this condemnation brought than was the case for men. The world of humanist learning was even more closed to all but a very few women: a full classical education was felt to be appropriate neither to their intellectual capacity nor to their proper role in society. The archetypal bluestocking Anna Maria van Schurman was a minor wonder of the age for her exceptional humanist erudition, but it was an admiration marked by a certain condescension; she was regarded as something of a freak of nature rather than being accepted as an equal by other scholars.

Women were half the Dutch population but played only a minor role in the arts and literature, nor was there much sign of a proto-feminist challenge to the conventional thinking which supported male cultural hegemony. Yet the active economic roles of women both inside and outside the home and notorious assertiveness of Dutch women helped to shape the broader cultural developments of the Golden Age. They were particularly influential in moral and religious matters: it was women who led riots over the price of bread at times of scarcity, and also women – from a rather different section of society – who produced some of the leading lights of the *nadere reformatie*. It was also mostly women who made witchcraft accusations as well as being the object of such suspicions, and the specific character of the most common charges reflects more central female concerns than male fantasies – not witches' sabbaths or sex with the Devil, but the illnesses of children and the failure of butter to churn.

By the beginning of the century witchcraft prosecutions had already ended in Holland and Zeeland, with one or two possible exceptions, but belief in and fear of witches continued throughout the century though their intensity may well have diminished. Certainly while both the civil and religious authorities may have regarded belief in witchcraft as an unassailable part of religious orthodoxy, they clearly no longer felt able to take action against supposed witches, and this may well be an area where a significant gap between popular and elite culture was opening up. This leads to the question as to whether the challenges to traditional beliefs and practice were largely restricted to the social and political elite. While such questions are notoriously difficult to answer, there are considerations that suggest that cultural change affected all of Dutch society to a greater or lesser extent, not just the wealthy and better educated.

In the first instance, urbanization and the transformation of the rural economy affected most of the population of the maritime region, though this was much less the case in the land provinces. The sheer increase in the size of the larger towns weakened the cohesion of urban communities and forced individuals to rely more and more on the support of family, friends and particular institutions such as guilds or their churches or sects. The flow of immigrants, both Dutch and foreign, into the Holland towns throughout the century also had important effects, though in most cases not on the scale of that

experienced by Amsterdam.<sup>7</sup> The penetration of the market into the countryside brought an increase in the size of farms together with a progressive squeezing-out of smallholders and a consequent rise in the number of landless labourers working for wages only, and the development of a rural middle class servicing the farming community brought a significant change to the educational and cultural mix in rural areas. In addition to these internal economic changes, the intensification of commerce in Europe and the opening of direct trade to the Americas and Asia brought new experiences to common seamen as well to merchants, and the introduction of colonial products brought new processing industries as well as exposing the population as a whole to the varied effects of coffee, tea and tobacco. New social habits started to develop round tea-drinking, and by the later years of the century coffee-houses were beginning to provide a perhaps more civilized alternative to taverns, while smoking rapidly became an indispensable part of everyday life for many men.

Developments in communications, both physical and intellectual, must also have had a considerable impact on the way the Dutch perceived the world around them. Moving from place to place became easier through improvements in the canal system and especially the construction of the passenger-barge network in the first half of the century, so that it took only a few hours to move between most of the towns in Holland. At least of equal importance was the further development of a print culture, providing greater opportunities for cultural expression and transmission. Given the high and rising level of literacy, printed materials could now reach a majority of the Dutch population and the enormous number of pamphlets published in the period make it clear that such material was consumed avidly. Moreover some of these developments can be seen coming together in the later seventeenth century when convincing anecdotal evidence provides scenes of people gathering in bookshops and coffee-houses to discuss the latest controversial books and pamphlets. Oral culture was far from dead and indeed intersected dynamically with print, with some pamphlets being read out in public and printed ballads being sung in the streets by vendors. Sermons also continued to have a powerful impact in a society largely lacking in other forms of verbal public communication, though they too were sometimes published for more leisurely consideration.

The gradual change from a largely Catholic to a largely Protestant society had the potential to affect almost everyone to at least some extent, though not as completely as committed reformers would have wished. The Republic was never transformed into a truly godly society on the Genevan model, which itself was more of a pious myth than a social reality and certainly had lost much of its original rigour by the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, most of the population, in so far as they went to church at all, attended services in the vernacular, led by ministers rather than priests, and with the sermon rather than a mystical sacrifice as the chief focus of worship. However, this was a religiously pluralist society which meant that membership of a church or sect was in an important sense voluntaristic rather than something which was an integral part of membership of the political community, as was the case in much of Europe. Admittedly by the later seventeenth century most people were effectively born into the Reformed Church, and there was a certain conflation of loyalty to the state with adherence to its official church. On the other hand people could leave the Church if they so wished, and one of the reasons why excommunication was so rare was because it carried no significant civil penalties and so had lost a considerable part of its force. The religious atmosphere varied in different parts of the country: pluralism was stronger in the towns of Holland, nonconformists had a distinctly less easy life in the land provinces, and North Brabant was almost totally Catholic under a thin layer of Protestants who had to compromise to administer the region at all effectively.

An intriguing question remains as to the extent to what extent the inhabitants of the Republic came to see themselves as Dutch. At the beginning of the century provincial loyalties were almost certainly stronger than any nascent Dutch patriotism and there was still considerable fluidity and uncertainty about the frontiers of the new state – much of North Brabant, for example, only became clearly part of the Republic after 1648. There was an interesting terminological problem as the primary meaning of *Nederlands* (Dutch) only slowly came to be a citizen of the Republic rather than an inhabitant of the Low Countries as a whole, i.e. including both North and South. A sense of identification with the whole of the Netherlands seems to have persisted in some quarters until well into the seventeenth century, but to have largely died away after 1648, though it may have continued to have

some appeal to the Catholic community. However, there was a significant change during the Golden Age: whereas during the Truce crisis there was a real fear that the Republic might break up, by 1650 the essential unity of the Dutch state was no longer really in question, despite occasionally severe internal disputes. Local and provincial patriotism were still strong, and it would be a century or more before loyalty to the nation became of overriding importance; nevertheless it had become generally accepted that the provinces needed the Republic and a nascent Dutch identity was beginning to form.

The Golden Age was a period of change, often tumultuous, in most areas of life, and not least in culture. The magical universe was fading, and was being replaced by a modern scientific understanding of the nature of the world, though the transformation was far from complete by the end of the century. Similarly, the place of religion within Dutch society had changed decisively: the religious pluralism of the Republic at the beginning of the century perhaps unexpectedly survived to become a central feature of Dutch cultural life, while the consequent need for a degree of confessional neutrality in public life led to a modest but unmistakable degree of secularization, notably in the political sphere. Although there was a close link between the Dutch state and the Reformed Church, the central political priorities were essentially secular – economic prosperity, the preservation of internal peace and order and defence against foreign threats – with no commitment to imposing any form of confessional conformity.

The extent of the changes had clearly defined limits: science had to be made to conform to what was still an essentially religious world-view; and secularization could only go so far in what remained a fundamentally Christian society. Nevertheless, by the end of the century Dutch culture was far less in thrall to the wisdom of the ancients, and it had become possible to believe in progress rather than renaissance. The Enlightenment was imminent – but for the Dutch it was to be a Christian enlightenment.



## 4

# Painting and Graphic Art

Dutch art is the outstanding cultural achievement of the Golden Age, but the works exhibited in modern art galleries as examples of seventeenth-century Dutch painting can be misleading if they are taken – as they all too often are – as representative of Dutch culture as a whole during this period. What is still known as the Dutch School is the result of three centuries of selection by collectors and connoisseurs. What they were looking for was what they judged to be the best paintings of the period and, while tastes have changed during these years with some artists and styles rising in esteem and some falling out of favour, something like a critical consensus emerged over time as to what should and should not be considered part of the Dutch School. The result of this careful winnowing is a body of work that may well be the best of Dutch art but is by no means representative or even typical of the totality of paintings produced in the Republic during the century. Inevitably, much of the art produced in the Golden Age has been lost, but enough remains to show that it was considerably more varied than might be suggested by the rather specific tastes of the architects of the Dutch School. Indeed, the painters who were later most admired were not always regarded as such by contemporaries: the leading connoisseurs of the seventeenth century tended to prefer art that was more clearly in the mainstream of European art since the Renaissance rather than the work of the artists now regarded as the great Dutch masters. In the end it may well be that those now recognized as the leading artists of the Dutch School – Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hals, Jacob van Ruisdael, Jan Steen – untypical as they might be of the totality of art produced in this period, nevertheless provide a deeper insight into the nature of Dutch seventeenth-century culture than the mass of more typical

but run-of-the-mill paintings. Yet these latter also provide important evidence for the complex nature of the Golden Age.

A vast number of paintings was produced in Holland in the course of this century: it has been estimated that around 10 million were painted during the period of the Republic and at least half of these must have been made in the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> The number of painters was also high; the great majority of them painted for a living and most were members of a guild – St Luke's – which regulated their activities, as was the case with other craftsmen. Painters ran small businesses, used apprentices, and some, though by no means all, were able to attain at least a certain prosperity. The Dutch economic boom provided a demand for such luxury items as paintings, though the low prices charged for most means that they were a rather modest indulgence, affordable by the broad section of the population which had at least some money to spare after paying for necessities. The quality and price of paintings varied enormously and the evidence from pictures of house interiors – in so far as they can be regarded as reasonably true to life – and from inventories suggests that a lot of people bought many paintings rather than just a select and treasured few. So there was a considerable demand for art, or at least for paintings as decoration, in the Dutch economy, but there was also a large supply, and it seems that this became an oversupply both of art and artists by the later seventeenth century. Of course, by this time fundamental problems within the Dutch economy were becoming apparent which must have lowered demand for such luxury items. Changes in domestic taste might also have had an effect on the market: the increased popularity of wallpaper and of decorative pottery tiles such as Delftware, for example, might possibly have undercut the need for paintings as interior decoration. Dutch prosperity over the century as a whole encouraged the development, in a modest way, of a consumer society, and in such a society tastes could change, sometimes with far-reaching results.

Dutch art was shaped by market forces rather than by the patronage of a handful of rich patrons or powerful institutions. What was lacking was as important as what was present: the Catholic Church was in no position to be the patron of the arts that it had been in the past; the Reformed Church was founded on the Word and dismissed all images as smacking of idolatry; there was no royal court, and the

Dutch nobility lacked the wealth to be an influential source of patronage. There were commissions of an official or semi-official nature: paintings to decorate the new town hall of Amsterdam, for example, and the courts of successive princes of Orange doled out a careful but rising degree of patronage to artists who were able to produce works which suited their increasing political pretensions. Frederik Hendrik, for example, commissioned history paintings from Gerrit Honthorst, and the Huis ten Bosch near The Hague, intended to celebrate his achievements, was filled with history paintings and allegories under the artistic direction of a leading artist from the Spanish Netherlands, Jacob Jordaens. Commissions of this nature tended to be for comparatively large works, at least in comparison to paintings intended for private houses rather than public buildings, and often encouraged the employment of a rather more exuberant style and overt symbolism than was usual in most Dutch art of the time. At a rather lower level, the group portrait could never have flourished without the commissions from militia companies and the regents of a variety of charitable institutions and guilds. These too were usually larger pieces, but were much more restrained in style: indeed, many were positively pedestrian and it took a master such as Frans Hals to bring them to life – and there were few with Hals' mastery of this subject. Then there were private commissions from wealthy collectors and connoisseurs who preferred paintings which satisfied their distinctly conventional conceptions as to what good art should be. These were men with a humanist education who thus knew what proper art should look like, and their preference ran to paintings with a complex iconography to demonstrate that it served a higher moral or spiritual purpose, and also to allow opportunities for viewers to exercise their cultured ingenuity in interpreting its meaning. There were also commissions from the wealthy bourgeoisie for individual portraits and family groups. Artists who could attract such commissions and satisfy such demands could ask relatively high prices for their works and enjoy a modest prosperity in business and attain a solid position in society. Such commissions, however, were too few in number to support more than a small minority of Dutch artists.

Most Dutch painters seem to have had to sell their works on a more or less open, and often more or less anonymous, market. The

buyers in this marketplace came from the section of the population with at least some money to spare for embellishment of the home, but probably not a lot. So the paintings had to be relatively cheap, and they also had to be of a size and shape to fit into ordinary middle-class homes. As these paintings were destined for the domestic environment, their subjects had also to be comfortable to live with, which helps to explain the popularity of landscapes and a wide variety of genre paintings, as well as still-lives. Catholic families might well choose works in their specific devotional tradition – after all, being a Catholic and living like one at home was not illegal – but the Reformed Church rejected such symbolic aids to piety, though its members might well accept biblical subjects and perhaps still-lives as reminders of the ephemeral nature of all worldly things. On the whole this market was not, as was the case with the upper bourgeoisie, steeped in humanist culture and so was relatively free from educated preconceptions as to what constituted proper art. Indeed it may well be that the purchasers in this marketplace were not buying art at all in any self-conscious way, but regarded the paintings they owned in much the same way as the brass, copper and pewter kitchen implements they displayed with such apparent pride (as shown in paintings at least). Paintings were sold either by the artists themselves, in specialist shops or from market stalls, and there was a supply in just about every town, certainly in Holland. Indeed, in the towns the painters' guilds tried to protect the local market from intrusions from outside, as they did in the case of any craft, but they seem to have fought an increasingly losing battle because of the complex nature of the market for art. The vast majority of paintings produced in the Republic in the seventeenth century were aimed at this market. Painters did not become rich in satisfying this demand, but they could hope to make enough to support a stable lower middle-class lifestyle. This large and relatively unsophisticated market was a major, if not the major, influence in enabling the development of new subjects and styles in Dutch art.

However, the artistic achievements of the seventeenth century did not, and could not have, come out of the blue: they were to a considerable extent an organic development of the art which had flourished in the Netherlands in the two preceding centuries. The Low Countries had been the leading centre for Renaissance art outside

Italy, and by the late sixteenth century had developed styles and subjects which were to have a profound influence on Dutch painting in the seventeenth century. A distinctive urban culture had developed in the Netherlands in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, centred particularly though not exclusively on the great cities of Flanders and Brabant – Bruges, Ghent and Antwerp – and the equally urban-based cultural flowering of the Golden Age was a natural development from this. Apart from the general influence of ‘Flemish’ art on Dutch painting, the large-scale migration of Southerners to the infant Republic at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century included a considerable number of artists, many of whom settled in Haarlem alongside textile workers from the South drawn to the linen industry of the town. Although it is a little artificial to make sharp distinctions between South and North of the Netherlands at this stage, and a separate Dutch identity only emerged slowly in the course of the seventeenth century, nevertheless the cultural influence of immigrants from Flanders and Brabant was important, not least in painting. A notable example is Karel van Mander, who moved north in the early 1580s and settled in Haarlem, where he later became the master of the young Frans Hals (though his strictures against portraiture and in favour of history painting<sup>2</sup> evidently failed to influence the latter). Few of his paintings seem to have survived and his lasting reputation rests on his publication of *Het schilder-boeck* (The Painter Book) in 1604, a combination of art theory with biographical sketches of painters both past and present, particularly from the Netherlands.

The number of paintings produced in the Republic during the Golden Age was not only very great but also very varied in both style and quality. At one extreme was a mass of cheap paintings of poor or indifferent quality, including copies of better and more expensive originals; at the other was a much smaller number of works now recognized as among the greatest achievements of Western art; and in the middle was a remarkably large number of highly competent paintings on a wide range of subjects and in a variety of styles. Most of this production, particularly at the cheaper end of the scale, has been lost, painted over or thrown away; other paintings have been the victims of changing taste and relegated to art historical obscurity. It must be emphasized that what has survived is not necessarily

representative of the whole of Dutch art production in Golden Age, but is the result of a selection process that started in the later eighteenth century and accelerated with the foundation of the great national art collections in the nineteenth century.

Of course, the main criterion for selection was perceived quality: private collectors and the directors of public galleries were looking for the best art. However, this was not always a straightforward matter: as ideas about what constituted great art changed between the eighteenth and the twentieth century, so did judgements as to the importance of artists in the past. As far as Dutch art is concerned the most spectacular case has been the rise of Vermeer from being only one among a number of highly regarded genre painters to recognition as one of the great masters. In contrast, some other painters much lauded in their own time have suffered from changes of taste since the later eighteenth century. There is now a considerable degree of agreement as to who the great Dutch painters were, despite the occasionally wavering status of some artists, though that is no guarantee that there will be no changes to the canon in the future. However, these artists and their works were only a very small part of the total production of paintings, and the painters and paintings that have not stood the test imposed by the taste of later times are also an important part of the culture of the Golden Age. It may not be true that mediocre artists tell us more about Dutch culture than the great masters, but it is undoubtedly the case that they reveal a dimension that might otherwise be missed.

Another criterion which played an important part in the selection of what was to belong to the Dutch School, particularly in the Netherlands, was the search for art which expressed what were felt to have been the essential values of the Golden Age. Economic and political decline in the eighteenth century caused the Dutch to look back to the previous century to discover what had gone wrong, and the answer they found was the decline of those virtues of hard work and sober living which were believed to have been at the root of Dutch success. By extension, the best of Dutch art was felt to be that which expressed the spirit of the age, and paintings which showed anything approaching frivolity or luxurious living were treated with the deepest distrust – unless they were clearly intended as warnings against such a transgression of proper Dutch mores. Thus, while the

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Pieter Lastman, *Juno Discovering Jupiter and Io*, 1618, oil on panel.

Dutch School was defined as those artists whose work reflected the fundamental values of the Golden Age, the works of these artists could in turn be used as evidence for what these values were. The result was a serious oversimplification both of Dutch art and of the society which produced it.<sup>3</sup>

So the Dutch seventeenth-century art now on display in major art galleries is only a part of the total number of paintings – not to mention engravings and prints – produced in that period. Much that was cheap and shoddy has been lost, and perhaps only the historian of culture will regret its passing, but much has been side-lined or forgotten merely because of a failure to fit in with preconceptions about what was best or most typical of the age. It is understandable that historians have been most interested in the innovative aspects of Dutch seventeenth-century culture, but the traditional and the conventional were also important in art as in culture more generally. One of the central themes of this book is that the peculiar character of Dutch culture in the Golden Age came from the tension between conservative and innovatory forces, and this is no less true of painting than of literature, religion, political thinking or natural philosophy. One important strand of Dutch art was innovatory through realism in genre, landscape and portraiture, but the paintings produced in



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Cornelis van Poelenburg, *Women Bathing in a Landscape*, c. 1630, oil on canvas.

the Republic during this period included a great many history and other paintings more in line with the dominant art theories of the age in Europe. Indeed it is notable that, just as there was no theoretical challenge to the social position of the nobility despite the political dominance of the regents, so there was no theoretical justification or defence of the new styles and subjects pioneered by Dutch painters, and Van Mander at the beginning of the century and Houbraken towards its end continued to reiterate post-Renaissance orthodoxies about the nature and purpose of art.

Whether seen as being produced by a distinctive School or a less homogeneous group of painters, seventeenth-century Dutch art was a remarkable achievement in both quality and quantity. It is true that what are now seen as the great achievements of Dutch art, and indeed a vital part of what made this a Golden Age, were not particularly appreciated by European contemporaries, and even in the Republic the cultural elite was more impressed by contemporary Italian and French artists and their Dutch counterparts who strove for great art in conventional terms and chose noble themes for their paintings. Nevertheless, the Dutch move away from the dominance



of history paintings and the demonstration that less grandiose subjects could also produce viable art, together with their pictorial realism, can in the long term be seen to have marked a decisive turning point in the development of Western art.

Any brief account of Dutch painting in this period faces the problem that judgements as to who the most important artists were changed quite radically in the succeeding centuries, and this process continues in response to varying critical fashion. In the seventeenth century a particular type of meticulous genre paintings, such as those by Gerrit Dou, Gabriël Metsu and Frans van Mieris, was much admired, and such technical brilliance continued to be highly regarded well into the following century, only to fall out of favour somewhat in later years. Dou's *A Lady Playing a Clavichord* is a reminder of how attractive the work of such artists could be and helps to explain their lasting popularity. Similarly, the pair of paintings by Metsu, *Man Writing a Letter* and *Woman Reading a Letter*, combines fine painting with a use of light reminiscent of the best of Vermeer and adds some rather teasing iconographic elements to satisfy the connoisseur. In contrast to the varying reputation of this sort of genre painting, while landscapes may have suffered from a certain critical disdain at the time because of the supposed insignificance of their subject matter, the reputations of the leading artists in this field have only increased with the passage of time. Now Jacob van Ruisdael is recognized not only as the outstanding landscape painter of his age but as one of the truly great masters of the Dutch School. The reputation of other leading landscape artists has perhaps not been quite as secure, with the stock of Aelbert Cuyp, for example, wavering from time to time while that of Jan van Goyen has risen steadily. Nevertheless, the influence of Dutch landscape painting has been enormous – even in the eighteenth century when critical theory continued to look down on what was seen as simple imitation of nature. There were fewer townscape painters but they were surprisingly influential even outside the Republic – the link to Venetian *veduta* of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries seems clear. Seascape painters found a quite lucrative niche in the market, and the depictions of battles at sea by the Van der Veldes were highly prized, satisfying as they did the need for important subjects as well as having contemporary relevance. Later taste has tended to favour seascapes with less

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Gabriël Metsu, *Man Writing a Letter*, 1662–5, oil on panel.

gory themes, such as *The State Barge Saluted by the Home Fleet* by Jan van de Capelle, with the increasing acceptance of the mundane as a proper subject of art.

What has never been disputed is the importance of Rembrandt – though towards the end of his career his work became less fashionable, and there were always critics ready to question his taste.<sup>4</sup> He has become perhaps the most iconic figure of the time, and his self-portraits, group-portraits and paintings of scenes from the Old



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Gabriël Metsu, *Woman Reading a Letter*, 1662–5, oil on panel.

Testament overshadow less immediately striking images of the Golden Age. It is wholly appropriate, in more ways than the obvious, that his so-called *Night Watch* (properly *Officers and Men of the Company of Captain Frans Banning Cocq and Lieutenant Willem van Ruijtenburgh*) should be displayed with almost religious awe in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, with the other nearby militia pieces only serving by their inferiority to emphasize its lonely glory. Yet in important ways this pre-eminence is misleading, as Rembrandt was far from typical of

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Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self Portrait*, 1669, oil on canvas.

Dutch seventeenth-century art and artists either in his life or his works. He studied (albeit briefly) under the mannerist Pieter Lastman, became a fashionable portraitist and – in contrast to what was deemed typical of the Dutch School – painted numerous scenes from the Bible. At one stage he seems to have aimed to become recognized as a great artist according to baroque standards of taste, and he produced a number of religious paintings for the stadhouder Frederik Hendrik which match the Flemish baroque of Rubens and Jordaens for drama. In short he was a history painter and portraitist with overweening artistic – and social – ambitions, and his life was as untypical as his art. Similarly, no other artist of the time has suffered so greatly from attempts to present him as a romantic rebel against convention in

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Rembrandt van Rijn, *Woman Bathing in a Stream*, 1654, oil on panel.

both life and art, and perhaps no other artist has offered would-be biographers so much fuel for speculation (though recently Vermeer has been the subject, rather improbably but perhaps inevitably, of attempts to dramatize his rather uneventful life).

Whereas most Dutch artists specialized in order to find a niche in an overcrowded market, Rembrandt's work was enormously varied in technique as well as subject. Although his reputation was founded on his paintings in oil, his etchings are also among the greatest artistic

achievements of the age, and some of his drawings are minor masterpieces. After his early paintings in the meticulous Leiden style, he proved himself a master of the portrait and became unrivalled as a self-portraitist. His group portraits are matched only by Frans Hals, and *Night Watch* turned the militia piece into a true work of art, though perhaps not to the satisfaction of all the sitters, who may have preferred the team photograph approach which was usually employed, and which had the advantage of making sure everyone could be seen clearly. Whereas most Dutch artists painted for a living, and were willing to adjust their styles and subject matter to suit the demands of the market, Rembrandt seems to have been determined to go his own way – at least after his earlier attempts at achieving fame and fortune. For example, despite the conventionality of the subjects of his history paintings, his treatment is sometimes shockingly subversive – *The Rape of Ganymede*, where the beautiful youth is turned into a baby pissing in terror as he is carried off by an eagle, is a prime example – and some of his later biblical studies, possibly using Hendrickje Stoffels as his model, notably *Bathsheba with King David's Letter*, display a tenderness which transcends the genre.

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Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*, 1632, oil on canvas.

Rembrandt, despite some contemporary detractors, was a major figure in his own time and his reputation has never wavered since. In contrast, while Johannes Vermeer enjoyed a certain reputation during his lifetime, soon after his death he entered a long period of relative obscurity before his rediscovery in the later nineteenth century. Since then, of course, his stock has continued to rise, and he has joined his more flamboyant contemporary as one of the acknowledged great masters of Western art. His reputation rests, in sharp contrast to Rembrandt, on a small number of genre paintings, though a few early history pieces also survive.<sup>5</sup> Vermeer's work is now seen as almost the archetype of the best of the Dutch School, particularly as it not primarily the subjects of his paintings which have enthralled later



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Jan Vermeer, *Woman at a Virginal*, c. 1670–72, oil on canvas.

generations but the way in which they are painted, notably the distinctive use of colour and light. How they were originally seen – or read – is notoriously hard to determine: the iconography of some of the pictures is rich enough to have excited successive generations of scholars, but it could be argued that these images would have been in fact rather banal to contemporaries who were used to unravelling much more complex pictorial puzzles. For example, the symbolism in *The Art of Painting* is in the main so obvious as to be almost perfunctory and the references in *The Allegory of Faith* are similarly straight out of the textbook (in this case Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*). Only 36 of his paintings survive (and some of these are disputed), though he may have produced more that have been lost. This is very little for a professional artist, and is certainly dwarfed by the output of most of his contemporaries. In this respect he is also far from typical of the artists of the Golden Age.

The third great master of the period is Jacob van Ruisdael who has steadily risen from the pack of landscape artists, partly because of the almost romantic quality of many of his paintings. It is no accident that in his *Windmill at Wijk bij Duurstede* he created one of the most durable images of the Golden Age. He can also serve as a reminder of the great popularity of landscape and the remarkable number of at least highly competent painters specializing in this field. Indeed, some of them fall little if at all short of Ruisdael in quality. Aelbert Cuyp has left us with some of the most archetypal scenes of the Dutch countryside, and his prominent and almost monumental cows are a reminder that dairy and beef cattle were one of the main bases of Dutch agricultural prosperity, and can serve to represent the Golden Age as much as Ruisdael's windmill. His *Cattle in a River* – somewhat misnamed – shows a group of cows on the bank of a river with one drinking, though one of his finest pieces – *The Maas at Dordrecht* – is a river scene with no cattle. Although Cuyp's art has been labelled Italianate by some art historians, in most respects it remains quintessentially Dutch. Van Goyen also made a distinctive and innovative contribution to Dutch landscape through his distinctive tonality, and Hobbema produced one of the last great landscape paintings of the century (*The Avenue of Trees at Middelharnis*) after apparently giving up painting for some decades after a fortunate marriage.



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Jacob van Ruysdael, *Landscape with a Ruined Castle and a Church*, c. 1655–70,  
oil on canvas.

The foundations for the Dutch school of landscape painting can be found to a certain extent in sixteenth-century Flemish art, and more particularly in the influence of a number of prominent artists who were part of the great migration from the Southern Netherlands to the Republic after the fall of Antwerp to the Spanish in 1585. One of the truly great masters of the Dutch School, Frans Hals, was part of this migration. He was born in Antwerp (1582/3) but his parents moved to Haarlem by 1591, so he may have had a toe in the Flemish camp but grew up in the new Dutch state. So he can be seen as both part of the migration from the Southern Netherlands which made such an important contribution to the Golden Age, and as one of the first great Dutch artists of the century. Hals became the outstanding portrait painter of the period, and also produced some of the most successful group portraits, and in this latter field he was matched only by Rembrandt. His masterpieces in this subject are the *Regents of the Old Men's Almshouse* and *Regentesses of the Old Men's Almshouse* painted towards the end of his life, the latter in particular showing his striking ability to suggest individual character. He is also similar to Rembrandt in that his powerful images dominate our view of the

Golden Age, and at least partly obscure other aspects of the reality of the time. Hals' men and women did exist, but they were all successful people in one way or another who could afford to have their pictures painted – and such healthy and vigorous images were not the whole truth of the lives of people in the seventeenth century. A sharply different picture of the period is given by the genre pieces of Jan Steen, which are full of incident and concerned with life in a section of society decidedly less affluent than that inhabited by the men and women seen in formal portraits. Many of his paintings are, on the surface at least, intended to teach moral lessons and have titles reflecting proverbs or popular sayings, and the Dutch have tended to see his works as expressing better than any other artist of the time something important about the Dutch national character. A typical example of this is *'The young ones chirrup as the old ones sing'* with its perhaps ambivalent message. Such folksiness can be misleading – these are carefully composed pictures with quite an elaborate iconography suggesting a conventional moral lesson. On the other hand the liveliness of the paintings can to an extent be seen as undermining the overt moral message.

Jan Steen is, of course, only one of a small host of painters specializing in 'scenes of everyday life'<sup>6</sup> who were active throughout the Golden Age. Pieter de Hooch now seems to be considered as at best a minor master, though his best work provides some of the most enduring images of Dutch domestic life in this period. He lived and worked in Delft for many years and the inevitable comparison with Vermeer has perhaps done him no favours. However, his work has been seen as illustrating an important change in Dutch society. His early work in the 1650s in Delft shows modest and restrained interiors, while after his move to Amsterdam (c. 1660–61) his subjects begin to suggest rather more luxury and self-indulgence. However, the change was far from abrupt and *Two Women beside a Linen Chest* (1663) is a characteristic *doorkijkje* with a view from one room through another to the street, with an interior as plain as in his Delft period. Whether this change really illustrates a shift in the lifestyle and attitudes of the upper middle classes or a more superficial modification of taste in art is entirely unclear. It has been suggested that an increasing elegance and visible expense is also to be found in portraits painted in the later years of the century, and that even still-lives became more

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Jan Steen, *'The young ones chirrup as the old ones sing'*, c. 1663, oil on canvas.

elaborate. The more austere portraits of the first half of the century show how the sitters wished to be seen, not how they lived; by the same token, the richer dress in later portraits suggests a change in attitude rather than lifestyle. Such a shift might well be important but this case is a reminder that Dutch seventeenth-century paintings, despite their surface realism, are carefully composed and not simple reproductions of slices of life. It is dangerous to assume that such paintings provide an unmediated view of Dutch life in the seventeenth century: even if the artists had no greater purpose than producing something that would please a client or find a buyer easily, they were never intended to be used as evidence by social historians. This does not mean that they cannot be used as an important aid to understanding the period, but that interpretation of this material is far from straightforward.

True to the urban and decentralized nature of the Republic, and in this case most importantly Holland, the diversity of Dutch painting was partly the result of the different influences affecting art in various towns. All of the larger towns of Holland supported a certain

number of painters, and some became important centres with distinctive artistic characters. Haarlem was an early centre for artistic innovation: the rapid growth of the textile industry here was partly the result of large-scale immigration of entrepreneurs and craftsmen from the Southern Netherlands, and with them came a number of prominent artists who provided a new impetus to painting in the North. Similar economic boom conditions helped to nourish a distinctive style of art in Leiden, the other major textile town of Holland. The meticulous genre paintings of the Leiden *fijnschilders* provide a considerable contrast to the exuberant diversity of Haarlem, but it should be remembered that Leiden also produced Rembrandt, who indeed started out his professional career painting in the Leiden style in the 1620s though his ambitions soon drew him to Amsterdam. The Delft school is perhaps the best known and also the most distinctive in some ways, partly because it included Vermeer as well as Pieter de Hooch and Carel Fabritius (an exceptionally gifted artist who died young – he was killed when the arsenal in Delft exploded in 1654). Although Delft was counted as one of the six most important towns of Holland, it was overshadowed in the course of the boom of the early seventeenth century by the economic vitality and spectacular growth of the leading towns of the province, certainly by the second half of the century, and it is tempting to link the restrained tonality and modest subjects typical of the art produced here to its relative insulation from the rapid economic growth and accompanying social turbulence found in the more dynamic towns. This situation might have suggested a restricted market for art in the town, but Rotterdam and The Hague were within easy reach and were still growing in the third quarter of the century (which is when the major works of the Delft School were produced), and thus may have made up for any shortfall in local demand. Outside Holland, the old episcopal seat, Utrecht, had been one of the most important towns in the northern Netherlands before the Revolt, and in the early seventeenth century it supported a group of artists, most notably Hendrick ter Brugghen and Gerrit van Honthorst, who were strongly influenced by recent Italian art and particularly by the work of Caravaggio. Traditional cultural values seem to have been more powerful here than they were in Holland, so it is not entirely surprising that the art produced in the town should have a subtly different character.

Although Amsterdam was three times the size of the next most populous town, Leiden, it could never exercise the sort of cultural monopoly over the Republic, or even Holland, enjoyed by Paris over France or London over England. In the case of art, Haarlem, Leiden and Delft made their own particular contributions to the Dutch School, and it was not impossible for a painter to make a living in other towns as well, and even outside Holland, though there the pickings were decidedly more meagre in the poorer provinces. Nevertheless, Amsterdam was by far the largest town in the Republic and by far the most wealthy, and it became a cultural as well as an economic metropolis in the Golden Age. In the end its pull attracted a host of artists in search of commissions, patrons and buyers, but no particular school developed; all styles and trends were represented there. Rembrandt moved there when he aimed at achieving a European reputation as a portraitist and history painter, but so did the very different De Hooch. Amsterdam was too big and was the focus of too many varied cultural impulses to produce only a narrowly specialized form of art – unless the Dutch School as a whole can be considered as such.

The works of the painters who are now regarded as the leading artists of the age represented in effect a flouting of conventional notions as to what proper art should be, though it is far from clear that there was any conscious challenge on their part to these preconceptions. The theories of art established in the course of the Renaissance (and based on the Renaissance understanding of classical writings on the subject) focused on the suitability of the subject as much as the way in which it was painted. The humanist culture of the Renaissance was essentially a literary culture, based on the study of Greek and Roman classics in the belief that they represented a peak in civilization that could only be emulated, not bettered. Consequently humanists tended to read paintings as much as they viewed them; the subjects were as important as the art with which they were depicted. Proper art had to have suitably important subjects: great moments in history, religious ideas and scenes from classical mythology. History paintings, as they were called, illustrated great figures from the past or from classical mythology, and encouraged the emulation of noble lives and deeds. Religious subjects, of course, were intended to foster piety, and mythological subjects could provide both



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Pieter Claesz.,  
*Still Life with Drinking  
 Vessels*, 1649,  
 oil on panel.

secular and religious lessons. Such art had not only to have significant subjects, but had also to make their political, religious or philosophical point through a rich and often complex iconography. Such symbolic references soon became standardized in humanist culture, and by the seventeenth century it had become possible to publish handy guides for both artists and laymen to explain the meaning of the symbols and how they should be portrayed. Different meanings were attached to various flowers so that a still-life of a bowl of flowers could be read in quite a complex way. The muse of history, Clio, had to be depicted as a young woman with a book in her left hand, a trumpet (fame) in her right and a laurel garland on her head (as in Vermeer's *The Art of Painting*). Such iconography was inflexible and could be read off almost mechanically, but working out the references could also give pleasure. Although the advent of printing in the late fifteenth century had made literacy and the written word increasingly important in early modern Europe, the language of visual symbols and images was still central to seventeenth-century culture, and could reach literate and illiterate alike. People brought to art and other visual media – satirical prints, the title pages of books

and pamphlets and the like – minds trained to recognize and interpret quite elaborate visual clues. That is not to say that elegance or boldness of composition, lifelike depiction of people and nature and masterly brushwork were not appreciated, but that such skills had to be deployed in the service of a noble idea or ideal for true art to be possible. Such conservative cultural values retained much of their authority throughout the Golden Age, but Dutch painting began at least to change ideas as to the nature of art, subverting the pre-eminence of history painting and downgrading the importance of symbolic content in favour of more mundane subjects intended to be seen rather than read. The change was slow and only partly conscious and the process was only completed with the impact of Romanticism, or perhaps not until Impressionism began to revolutionize the way Europeans saw the world.

Dutch painting developed a whole range of new subjects which were to a significant extent divorced from explicit reference to noble ideals or religious concepts. Some artists, most notably Rembrandt, continued to produce histories, and these were certainly much admired by the educated elite in the Republic and could be expected to obtain the highest prices. Such paintings answered specific needs: when paintings for the new town hall of Amsterdam were commissioned in the 1650s, for example, what was felt to be appropriate were histories expressing the values of the government of the town. Justice, prosperity from trade and manufactures, civic virtue and the like were to be celebrated within its walls, and there was no shortage of artists happy to deliver what was required. Similarly, the various residences of the princes of Orange needed history paintings to express the status and ambitions of Frederik Hendrik and Willem III in particular. The demand for such art was, however, strictly limited given the lack of a royal court to serve as a fount of patronage, the relatively limited resources of the Dutch nobility, and the fact that the Reformed Church whitewashed the walls of its churches rather than commissioning religious art. There was, however, another and larger market for paintings with more mundane subjects and in more restrained styles. This was partly because most paintings were bought to be placed in private houses rather than stately homes, princely palaces or churches; they were for personal or family enjoyment rather than for public display. The buyers came from a wide range of

Dutch society, from rich merchants to solid citizens of no particular wealth, and although the upper end of this market had more or less conventional tastes and expectations regarding art, most of it did not. There was a demand for art which provided realistic portrayals of Dutch towns, countryside and people, and was part of a much broader interest in careful and precise descriptions of a whole range of phenomena.<sup>7</sup> The magical universe was fading, and symbolic ways of understanding the world were giving way to scientific study of its material reality. Art too was beginning to shift its focus from the affirmation of humanist and religious values and towards a concentration on the appearance of the physical world. Landscape and genre were the two most important subjects demonstrating this new way of seeing the world.

Genre paintings are, certainly in the Dutch School, simple images of people living ordinary lives: in domestic interiors, workplaces, taverns, street scenes and the like. The great masters of genre were, in their very different ways, Jan Steen and Vermeer. Yet there is a major problem with the interpretation of genre: in the past such paintings were seen as simple snapshots of contemporary reality, but it is becoming increasingly clear that most of them also have a significant symbolic content. So the meaning of such works is unclear – should they be read for their symbolic content or viewed as descriptions of everyday life? Perhaps it is best to see this dual nature of genre as a telling example of the fundamental dichotomy in Dutch culture during its Golden Age: between the old and the new, between traditional ways of understanding and experiencing the world and the emerging capitalist, scientific and increasingly secular world of modernity. The balance between the two contrasting ways of producing meaning varied from artist to artist and picture to picture, as did the extent to which they harmonized or clashed. Some would see the symbolic elements in Vermeer's greatest paintings as obtrusive intellectualism, detracting from their visual beauty, while in Jan Steen's genre pieces the iconography can be seen as only enhancing their robust playfulness. The market was also important: commissions from the wealthy and educated needed to include a complex iconography to satisfy their taste in art and also to allow them to exercise and demonstrate their skill and erudition in teasing out the symbolic meanings. In paintings intended

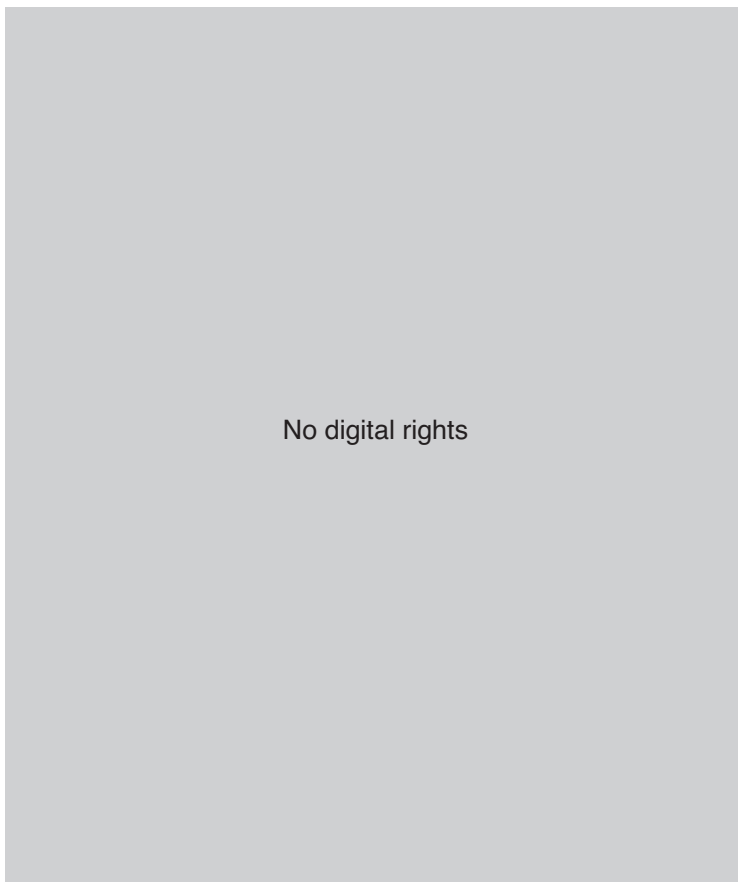


for a broader market, in contrast, the symbolic content might be merely perfunctory and in any case rather obvious.

There is a similar problem with landscape: roads, bridges, rocks and other topographical features could be read as references to life's travails or the pitfalls on the road to salvation, but in contrast to many genre pieces such references in landscape appear to be distinctly peripheral to the purely visual impact of the paintings. More immediately important is the way the Dutch landscape painting liberated the subject from the chains of artistic convention. Previously landscape had been merely the background to other subjects, or had at best needed a narrative element in the foreground as the ostensible subject of the painting. Dutch painters, even more than their Flemish predecessors, broke decisively with such limitations and produced unapologetic pure landscapes. To a significant extent this development can be attributed to the new market for art which developed in the Republic in the course of the economic and demographic boom. New buyers at the cheaper end of the market turned landscape into a popular subject and supported a large number of artists working in this field. Besides the recognized masters of the subject – Ruisdael, Van Goyen, Hobbema, Cuyp – there were many painters with distinctive approaches to landscape. Competition was heavy and painters seem to have specialized in search of a lucrative niche in the market – river scenes, winter scenes, animals in a landscape. Aert van der Neer painted moonlit or winter scenes, usually with a river prominently featured, while many of Hendrick Avercamp's works are winter scenes with people skating and playing on the ice. (The seventeenth century was in the middle of the so-called Little Ice Age and winters tended to be harsh and the ice reliably thick.) One possible reason for this widespread interest in pictures of the countryside was the increasingly urban nature of Dutch society, especially in Holland, which was the heart of artistic innovation and production. As more and more people lived and worked in towns, so the countryside could begin to be seen as picturesque rather than as a background to life and work which could be taken for granted. There is perhaps a parallel here to the popularity of country retreats (*buitens*) for those who could afford them. The rich bought or built impressive country houses, the less rich more modest places, but in both cases these were temporary escapes from the city – for

weekends or the summer – not permanent homes. In other words, for the majority of the population of Holland, the countryside was somewhere to visit for pleasure, not a place to live or work. There must also have been an awareness of the extent to which the face of the countryside, again especially in Holland, was being transformed by agricultural change and the great drainage projects. This is perhaps why many landscapes depict ponds and lakes, dunes and woods, rather than the increasingly neat and tamed farmland of Dutch commercial agriculture.

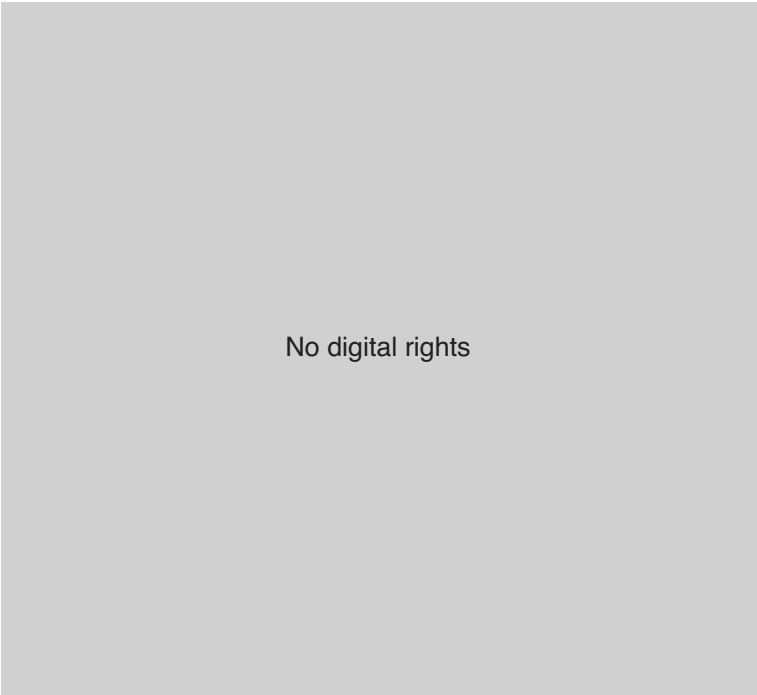
There may have been a similar motivation for the popularity of townscape paintings later in the century. These are usually seen as a development of the often fanciful architectural paintings of the previous century, but they are probably better understood as an urban variant of landscape. A more obvious descendant of architectural painting can be found in the church interiors which also enjoyed a certain vogue. This attention given to churches by some Dutch painters may stem from a nostalgia for the old religion or from an interest in the way they had been stripped of decoration to make them suitable for use by the Reformed Church. On the other hand churches provided some of the most important public spaces in Dutch towns, and belonged to the community (quite literally) as a whole rather than to the Reformed alone. Pieter Saenredam was an early specialist in this subject, though he also produced a key townscape – a view of the old town hall of Amsterdam, painted after it had burnt down – and church interiors can also be regarded as a form of townscape painting. Perhaps this was a sign of an awareness of how the urban landscape too had changed in the course of the first half of the century. The new town hall was built on the Dam and this change at the heart of Amsterdam was commemorated in works by both the leading townscape painters, Jan van der Heyden and Gerrit Berckheyde. An intriguing difference between townscape and ‘architectural’ painters is that all the evidence suggests that townscapes give a faithful account of real places while from the beginning this was not the case for the paintings of buildings. This tendency is strikingly evident in the work of the great master of the church interior, Emmanuel de Witte, whose paintings brought together features from different churches to produce compositions that looked real but were in fact creations of his imagination.



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Pieter Jansz. Saenredam, *Interior of the Buurkerk, Utrecht*, 1644, oil on panel.

Not surprisingly, given the importance of fishing and seaborne trade for the Dutch, some painters specialized in seascapes. As was the case with landscape, there were ready opportunities in this subject for symbolic links to higher religious or philosophical truths – storms at sea, safe harbour, shipwreck, rocks – but here again they appear usually to be rather perfunctory and are entirely absent in the case of the Van de Veldes. Willem van der Velde, father and son, were the leading seascape painters of the period, specializing in depictions of battles at sea. Willem the Elder was actually present at some battles in a small boat and sketched ships and incidents from life. However, while their paintings were accurate in detail, particularly



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Emmanuel de Witte, *Interior of the Oude Kerk, Amsterdam, during a Sermon*,  
c. 1660, oil on canvas.

as far as the ships involved were concerned, their depictions of battles, although to a large extent based on the accounts of observers and participants, were not snapshots of any particular phase of the actions but included in the same painting incidents which had taken place at different times.<sup>8</sup> Their paintings of the major battles of the Anglo-Dutch wars drew such attention that they were eventually lured away to work for Charles II, which was a major coup, in terms both of money and fame, for Dutch painters of this period.

This partial liberation from the hegemony of history painting cleared the way for a whole range of new subjects for art, but the break with the past was neither immediate nor complete. It is now clear that there was a strong symbolic element in Dutch genre and landscape that modified their pictorial realism, and that Dutch painters still felt it necessary to make concessions to conventional criteria of artistic worth – at least to a certain extent. Innovation was a slow process and seems to have been a largely unselfconscious one

as far as Dutch painters were concerned, and the importance of the overt moral or religious message in paintings seems to have declined steadily in the course of the century. A major problem is that there is very little evidence of what the painters themselves thought, and there are certainly no manifestos proclaiming the virtues of a new form of art. There is some evidence of contemporary attitudes but they are largely – as might be expected – from the ranks of the educated and couched in terms of conventional artistic values. In turning away from the view of Dutch painting as simple realism, there is the danger of allowing a concern for iconography to obscure the purely visual qualities of the art produced. It is possible that the cheaper end of the market for art was less concerned with complex extra-pictorial elements than was the case with paintings aimed at the social elite, and that the changing nature of this market was the driving force behind the innovations in Dutch art. In any event it is possible to see the work of Ruisdael, Vermeer and De Witte as great art irrespective of possible symbolic elements, and perhaps many unsophisticated contemporaries could also see this truth.

There is another dimension to painting in the Golden Age and to other branches of the visual arts which has been relatively neglected. In the first category are works which have generally been excluded from the Dutch School, or regarded as aberrant minor variations of the mainstream. In the other are a wide variety of graphic art – engravings, prints, frontispieces and other illustrations of books and pamphlets – as well as copies of paintings in various modes and of very varied quality. The material under these headings ranges from what was considered to be high art at the time, through the intentionally ephemeral, to distinctly crude reproductions of the work of others. It should also be remembered that there was a vast production of paintings in the seventeenth-century Republic, most of which has been lost. Most of these lost works were no doubt of dubious quality, but we cannot know what has been lost to the ravages of time, the vagaries of artistic taste and simple accident.

Dutch mannerist and baroque artists are not wholly forgotten, and are represented in the collections of the major galleries, but such works are generally presented as somewhat peripheral to the Dutch School proper. Some attention is paid to Pieter Lastman because Rembrandt worked under him for a brief period, and the Italianate

paintings of the Utrecht school provide an interesting and instructive contrast to the mainstream of Dutch landscape painting. At the time, however, such art was much more central to the interest of connoisseurs as it fitted the prevailing ideas of what art should be. Constantijn Huygens, poet and secretary to Frederik Hendrik, may have noted the talent of the young Rembrandt, but it should be remembered that at the same time he gave equal praise to Jan Lievens. Artists who had studied and worked in Italy were accorded more respect, and could ask more for their work, than those who had not. So for contemporaries, both Dutch and foreign, Dutch seventeenth-century art was a markedly different beast to the Dutch School as it now understood. History paintings, Italianate landscapes and complex religious allegories were much more prominent in the perception of the cultural elite, and the most admired artists tended to work in these styles. When Amalia von Solms commissioned paintings to celebrate the fame of her late husband, Frederik Hendrik, she naturally looked to painters working in the baroque style. Similarly, when the *burgemeesters* of Amsterdam commissioned paintings for their new town hall, they wanted works which would exemplify the values of good government and justice, and histories were most appropriate for this purpose. One undoubted masterpiece resulted: Rembrandt's *Conspiracy of Julius Civilis* was intended by those commissioning the piece to be a reference to the by then well-established founding myth of the Republic, according to which Dutch political liberties could be traced back to the Batavians' defence of their freedom against the Romans. However, this portrayal must have been more than a little at odds with the image of the Batavians held by the Amsterdam regents (and by the regent group as a whole), which saw them as respectable citizens rather like a projection of themselves into the past rather than the barbarian warriors depicted by Rembrandt. The history paintings delivered by Jan Lievens and Ferdinand Bol may have been rather more to their taste. This is partly a matter of horses for courses: history painting, portraits designed to impress the viewer and complex allegories could be used to legitimize political authority and bolster claims to superior social status. The princes of Orange could use such art as an adjunct to their peculiar political and social position in the Republic, but the regents used this tool to a much more limited extent. Amsterdam was not the only

city to build an impressive new town hall during the century, but there are no group portraits of town governments, and most portraits of regents seem to be more for family than public consumption. So while there was a certain, though limited, demand for art of this sort, and its prestige was high, most of Dutch painting was aimed at a very different market and answered very different needs.

One particular type of art produced in the seventeenth century seems to have disappeared almost entirely. The 'hidden' churches in which Catholics worshipped would have needed visual aids to piety. While the Reformed Church was concerned with the word of God and cleansed the churches it took over from any visual distractions, counter-Reformation Catholicism in deliberate contrast made lavish use of music, art and architecture to express its distinctive form of worship and religious sensibility where possible. Dutch Catholics could not build impressive churches but they could embellish the barns and attics they used with paintings and murals, as well as using organ music rather more enthusiastically than many of the Reformed. In the early decades of the century, the uncertain status and poor organization of Catholics must have made it difficult to find secure places for worship and thus have inhibited the expenditure of time and money on their decoration. However, by the middle of the century, with the Catholic Mission firmly established and Catholics in general, at least in Holland, beginning to enjoy a certain measure of informal freedom of worship, it became possible to fit out their churches in a more appropriate manner. However, little of the art produced for these churches has survived, and it is possible that most of it was notable more for its ability to inspire religious devotion than its aesthetic quality. Nevertheless, such visual aids must have been an important element in the cultural life of Dutch Catholics, and their loss leaves a significant gap in our understanding of the Golden Age. Conventional works of baroque piety would have suited the needs of these 'hidden' churches, and so increased considerably the volume of such art produced in the period. It should also be remembered that many painters as well as consumers of art were Catholic, and this may have significantly affected their preferences with regard to subject and style, but at present this remains speculation.

The invention of the printing press and its technical improvements opened up new possibilities for the visual arts as well as for

the written word. Although the impact of printing is usually described in terms of the proliferation of texts and their increasing centrality as a means of communication in early modern Europe, it also made possible the development of a new form of pictorial culture. Small, portable and relatively cheap pictures could now be made available for the first time, and by the seventeenth century the rather crude woodcuts of the early sixteenth had largely been replaced by more advanced methods of printmaking, especially etching and engraving. The combination of a very large number of printing presses, the production of large numbers of books and an enormous quantity of pamphlets, and a healthy supply of artists made the Dutch Republic – or in this case especially Holland – a nearly ideal place for the production of prints. Books required frontispieces, and pamphlets and satirical prints also required illustrations, varying from decorated title pages to complex political or religious allegories. At the more expensive end of the market, Dutch publishers excelled at the production of atlases, and luxury versions which were hand-coloured could be bought at even greater expense. There was also a market for reproductions of paintings, particularly portraits, which perhaps suffered less from lack of colour than other subjects. Inevitably, many of the printed illustrations to books and pamphlets were of dubious quality or indeed veracity. Printers and publishers had libraries of plates which could be used when illustrations of, say, a city in flames or of military atrocities were needed; it seems that the idea was more important than documentary accuracy.

Engraving and etching could also be used to create a distinct form of art. The number of copies which could be made from each copper plate was limited, but nevertheless this was still very different from producing a single painting which could only be imperfectly copied. Indeed, different states of a print could have equal legitimacy as works of art, if the etcher was skilful enough to anticipate the effects of progressive printings on the copper plate. Rembrandt was the outstanding etcher of the period and he used the technique with considerable effect in particular for biblical subjects. The unofficial title of his *Christ Healing the Sick* – the ‘Hundred Guilder Print’ – suggests that there was a lucrative market for such works, though if Rembrandt had really been able to ask such prices for his prints he might never have gone bankrupt. There were technical and practical



limitations on the size of prints, but they were nevertheless an important addition to the visual resources of the Golden Age.

Illustrations were also integral to one the the most popular literary forms of the early seventeenth century. Emblem books paired pictorial allegories and explicatory texts, usually in verse, and were especially effective for didactic purposes as the image acted as an effective mnemonic device for the message contained in the accompanying text. The renowned humanist Daniel Heinsius and the popular poet Cats were among those literary figures who found the emblem admirably suited to their purposes. The linking of text and image was, however, a much broader phenomenon, indicating perhaps that even in Protestant Europe the word had failed to supplant the icon. Literacy rates in the past are notoriously hard to measure but probably a higher proportion of the population were effectively literate in the Republic than anywhere else in Europe. However, even here that left many who were functionally illiterate and even more who were more adept at reading images than the written word. Pamphlets in particular were much more effective if they could use a striking image to catch the attention and draw the reader into the text. Their authors were, of course, aiming at a much wider audience than a highly educated elite, and satirical or allegorical illustrations could reach a much broader range of society than could prose or verse without such aid. Printing and Protestantism were transforming Dutch culture, but that transformation was not yet and never would be complete.

One of the most striking aspects of Dutch culture in the Golden Age is the sheer number of paintings produced, and the number of artists employed in this branch of the economy. A large proportion of the total output must have been at the cheaper end of the market, and most of the painters no more than competent journeymen, but it remains the case that the supply of paintings was very high. Demand appears to have matched supply for much of the century, but there are signs that as the economy began to falter after the mid-century so demand started to fall behind supply. The booming economy of the first half of the century encouraged the growth of a lively market for luxury goods such as paintings, but later the end of overall growth and the emergence of serious economic problems meant a decline in purchasing power in the economy as a whole,

which naturally hit non-essentials most severely. There also may have been a major shift in taste in interior design: just as the decline in demand for tapestries in its early years gave a boost to the market for paintings as a way to decorate the home, so the increasing popularity of wallpaper in the later seventeenth century both reduced the demand for paintings and changed the nature of that demand. Fewer and more carefully displayed pieces began to replace the rows of paintings which can be seen on the walls of so many pictures of domestic interiors. Of course, paintings were consumer durables that really were durable, and it may well be that the enormous production of roughly the first half of the century saturated the market. Whatever the reason there was enough of a surplus of both art and artists for a lively export trade in both to develop. In an important sense this can be seen as an example of the way in which the Dutch economy was able to supply goods and services that the home economies could not supply themselves. England was a notably welcoming market for a wide variety of Dutch paintings from anonymous genre pieces to portraits for nobility and gentry. After the Civil Wars and during the growing prosperity of the later seventeenth century there was a vogue for paintings of gentry families with their newly built or restored country houses in the background and itinerant Dutch artists seem to have painted many of these. The export of art and artists was at first an indication of Dutch economic strength as much as cultural influence and then of the systemic problems that were undermining that strength long before the end of the Golden Age.

The art of the Golden Age is its greatest, at the very least its most memorable, achievement, but it also exemplifies the tension between the conventional and the innovatory, tradition and change, which is the defining characteristic of the period. The strength of the conventional lay particularly in the prestige of Renaissance art in Europe as a whole together with an aesthetic which emphasized emulation rather than innovation. The force for change came from the novel nature of the economics of art in the Republic, with the decline of the church and nobility as patrons and the rise of a market for art with paintings as just another commodity. The change was far from complete and there were still patrons among the wealthier bourgeoisie and official bodies who required conventional art, but the new market was developed enough to encourage a move away from

history paintings towards a much greater emphasis on realism in genre and landscape in particular. However, Dutch culture in general was still to a considerable extent in thrall to the past, which meant that change and innovation tended to be regarded necessarily as a falling away from the universal aesthetic standard set by the classics and the Renaissance – or rather the Renaissance interpretation of classical culture. Consequently the innovations of the Dutch School were not trumpeted as triumphant artistic repudiations of jaded conventions, as was the case with successive movements in modern art from the Impressionists onwards.

On the contrary recent studies have demonstrated convincingly the surprising extent to which apparently straightforwardly realist works also have a significant link with more conventional art through their iconography. Genre and landscape conformed to a certain extent to conventional expectations of the purpose of art through a palette of images which could be interpreted as carrying a moral or spiritual message. The central problem in the interpretation of Dutch art in this period is the weight to be given to these conflicting elements: is this essentially realist art with only formal nods to convention, or was the pictorial realism merely a medium for the transmission of the conventional messages? Contemporary commentators seem to have seen the conventional, while later observers have focused on the realism. The resolution to this apparent contradiction lies in the recognition of the ambivalent nature of Dutch culture as a whole during the Golden Age: the art of this period was both conventional and innovatory, with the balance between the two forces varying with the individual artist and over time, and to separate the two would be dangerously anachronistic.

## 5

# Literature

The literature of the Dutch Golden Age is little known outside the Netherlands and the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, but for the Dutch it is a vital part of their period of greatness, and the canon of leading writers has remained largely unchallenged since the seventeenth century, triumphing over subsequent changes of literary taste. The reputation of some of these writers has wavered over the centuries, and a number of authors who enjoyed a certain fame in their own time have slipped into well-deserved obscurity, but Vondel, Hooft, Bredero and Huygens continue to be considered as among the finest writers that the language has ever produced. Yet, in marked contrast to Dutch painting, this was a very conventional literature which sought to conform to the standards of literary excellence set by the Renaissance in Europe, and the aim of writers was to emulate the acknowledged masters of the ancient world and Renaissance, and not to innovate or express the peculiar nature of the new society that was emerging in the wake of the Dutch Revolt. So in terms of the struggle between the old and the new in Dutch culture, these grand masters of Dutch literature much be assigned to the former – on the surface at least.<sup>1</sup>

Literature of this type required a degree of erudition both to write and to appreciate; both reading and writing were above all highly cultured activities. A thorough grounding in the Latin and Greek classics was an essential part of a proper schooling, though most educated Dutch seem to have been more comfortable with Latin than with Greek. The curriculum prescribed in 1625 for the Latin schools of Holland gives an idea of what was regarded as the essential core of a humanist education: apart from Latin (and Greek) grammar, Cicero, Virgil, Ovid and Horace, together with some

Aesop and Homer.<sup>2</sup> An educated man was expected to be fluent in Latin, capable of composing Latin verse, and able to produce an apt classical tag for all occasions. It was from the pool of men educated in this way that most of the leading writers and their readers were drawn. An important addition to the literary heritage with which the Dutch were working was Renaissance vernacular literature, in Italian and French particularly, which strove to match the achievements of the ancients. The consequence of this devotion to literary precedent was that innovation in form or content was held to be, by definition, inferior; the peak of literary excellence had already been reached, and to equal that achievement was the best that could be aspired to. There was, of course, one obvious problem: ancient society had been pagan and Dutch society was profoundly Christian. While this difference did not affect literary forms, the ways of thinking about this world and the next were an entirely different matter and in this respect paganism and Christianity would seem to be fundamentally incompatible. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the Renaissance is how few problems this difference seems to have caused. Certainly there were clerical fulminations against the use of pagan mythology in literature and art, but humanists seem to have had very little difficulty in reading ancient literature through Christian spectacles. Greek and Roman culture was seen as the repository of ancient wisdom – some looked even further back to the pristine religion of Egypt – and this truth must necessarily, it was thought, be compatible with Christianity if properly understood. So the dramas, epics and lyric poetry of the Golden Age were saturated with themes and imagery taken from pagan classical mythology, though in the service of a decidedly Christian morality.

There was one area, however, where innovation was felt to be necessary: the creation of a Dutch vernacular flexible and rich enough to be a vehicle for a literature which could match the ancients. For all the admiration for Latin and its central place in humanist education, the Renaissance had also seen the rise of vernacular languages, and by the beginning of the seventeenth century Italian, French and even English had proved capable of producing poetry and plays which could bear comparison with the classics. The situation was more problematic as far as Dutch was concerned. Although there was no shortage of literary works in Dutch, there was no standard language, and the most

prominent literary dialects in the past had been those of Flanders and Brabant, not Holland. In the Burgundian and Habsburg periods, Dutch had had to compete with Latin and French for cultural space, though its claims were becoming more pressing in the course of the sixteenth century. (It was even claimed in a book published in Antwerp in the 1560s that Dutch was the language used by God to speak to Adam in the Garden of Eden.<sup>3</sup>) In the event it was the Revolt which made it possible for Dutch to become the dominant language of a new state. However, the territory of the Dutch Republic as it emerged in the early seventeenth century was far from a single linguistic unit: apart from Fries, which is probably best regarded as a completely separate language, there were considerable differences between the dialects of Dutch spoken in Holland and in the eastern provinces, where the spoken language merged imperceptibly with the Low German of the nearby regions of the Holy Roman Empire. Faced with this situation, which was an administrative as well as a cultural problem, leading literary figures, notably P. C. Hooft and Constantijn Huygens, sought to fashion a standard Dutch language based on that spoken in Holland but improved by borrowings from the richer literary legacy of Flanders and Brabant. They also tried to purify the language by purging it of foreign loan words and finding suitable Dutch substitutes for them. This was not a straightforward task: Hooft's monumental history of the Revolt had to have marginal notes explaining the meaning of the new terms he was employing, and few of them seem to have caught on. Quite what the effect of such efforts was in the long term is unclear: it is likely that given the province's economic and demographic preponderance Holland's version of Dutch would have become the basis of a new common language in any case, and it is certainly true that formal administrative and legal documents at least continued to be full of Latinate terms. What is significant is that these men felt that the Dutch they inherited was lacking as a carrier for Renaissance culture. By the end of the seventeenth century its champions could justifiably claim that the standardized Dutch that had emerged by that point could match Italian and French as a literary medium, and they no longer seem to have felt the need to claim that it was the original language of God.

The writers in the Dutch canon were mostly drawn from considerably higher levels of society than the painters. This is partly

because of the expensive humanist education which was regarded as the indispensable foundation for literary success, but also because there was no living to be made writing poetry or plays. Writers needed inherited wealth or an occupation which did not take up all their time and effort. Hooft was the son of a leading regent of Amsterdam, was able to undertake a Grand Tour (which naturally included Italy) and gained the post of *drost* of Muiden. This was a responsible post but not one that seems to have taken up too much of his time, and he was able to make Muiden the centre of the most famous literary circle of the Golden Age. Constantijn Huygens came from a family with pretensions to at least a species of nobility, was invited to accompany Dutch ambassadors on a number of diplomatic missions (while in England he was knighted by James I), became a secretary to Frederik Hendrik and remained a devoted servant of the House of Orange for the rest of his life. Jacob Cats came from a regent background in Zeeland, became pensionary of Middelburg, then Dordrecht and finally reached the heights of *raadpensionaris* of Holland. The outstanding exception to this rule was Joost van den Vondel whose family was only beginning to prosper through trade during his childhood, so he did not enjoy the standard humanist education for boys from wealthy families – at a Latin school or through private tutors – and all his life he had to earn a living through trade or, later, by working as a clerk in the Amsterdam Loan Bank. To catch up with his peers he had to learn Latin and Greek as an adult, and he did not always find it easy to balance working for a living with the literary life.

The poet and playwright Gerbrandt Adriaensz. Bredero was also at least a step removed from the literary elite, being trained as a painter and relying on translations for his knowledge of the classics – ‘small Latin and less Greek’<sup>4</sup> perhaps. He can serve as a reminder that there was another level to literary activity in the Golden Age beyond that of the acknowledged masters. Jan Zoet is an example of quite another level of literary activity: he seems to have inhabited a sort of literary bohemia, with links to the stage, publishing and, later in life, millenarian religion. Quite how he earned a living is unclear, though he ran a bar for a number of years. He lacked a first-hand knowledge of the classics, but his work gave at least the impression that he knew them pretty well. He managed to get some of his plays

performed at the Amsterdam Schouwburg, and a remarkable amount of his very varied verse output appeared in print.<sup>5</sup> Attempting to write poetry was part of the culture of the solid middle classes as well as the social elite, and verse of one sort or another was a common form of expression, used for political satire, religious polemic and moral edification as well as for more private concerns. Far more people wrote verse than were ever published, and far more verse was published than is ever read today. Women also wrote verse, though they were less likely than men to be published, and more likely to remain in modest obscurity even if they were published unless they were particularly well connected. The sisters Maria Tesselschade and Anna Roemers Visscher were certainly gifted poets but their links to Hooft and the Muiden group were vital in gaining them recognition for their writing.

Poetry was circulated in manuscript and read in circles of friends, and so what was printed and published gives only a very imperfect impression of the place of poetry in Dutch culture. It is probably true to say that reaching a wider audience through print was considerably less important for most writers than securing the admiration and approval of educated opinion. Conscious elitism and false modesty combined to inhibit the desire to reach a wider readership, except for those like Cats who wanted to provide practical moral guidance to the solid citizens of the Republic through the medium of verse. It was possible both to impress the educated and reach a wider public through writing for the stage, and the Amsterdam Schouwburg at least could attract large audiences for its performances – and was grudgingly tolerated by Reformed opinion, as its profits benefited the orphanages of the town. However, there were few opportunities for staging plays outside Amsterdam, and even most of those plays which achieved a public performance were staged only a few times and then forgotten. Only a handful of playwrights were able to make a name for themselves in this way. In the main the aim of writers was to establish a reputation among the acknowledged cultural leaders of the time, not to gain wide popularity, let alone make a living out of their work. To gain such recognition it was necessary to conform to the increasingly rigid criteria of literary excellence based essentially on the example of the classics. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries humanist scholars had established these



standards with ever greater precision, and the rules set out by the Dutch humanist Daniel Heinsius had a considerable impact throughout Europe in the later part of the century.

What was definitely changing in the course of the seventeenth century was the balance between Latin and the vernacular. Despite the rise of Italian and French as literary languages, humanist culture was largely expressed in classical Latin, and in the Netherlands the neo-Latin poet Janus Secundus had been a major literary figure in the early sixteenth century. However, while Latin remained the preferred language for theology and philosophy, by the end of the Golden Age Latin verse had been reduced more or less to the status of a schoolboy exercise. As early as 1605 Daniel Heinsius, a humanist with a considerable European reputation, published a volume of verse in Dutch, and although men like Hooft and Huygens were perfectly capable of writing respectable Latin verse – and did so – their most serious literary efforts were expressed in Dutch. Grotius wrote his defence of the Revolt in Latin in 1610 as it was aimed at an international audience,<sup>6</sup> but Hooft's history of the Revolt was written in his deliberately cultivated Dutch.

The leading writers were mostly born before the beginning of the century, and had in common the aim of demonstrating that Dutch could be turned into a language capable of supporting great literature as defined by the rules inherited from the ancient world. The proper poetic forms were taken to be epic, lyric, pastoral and contemplative verse, and satire, together with tragedy, comedy and farce in drama. Dutch writers had a particular leaning towards long didactic poems, varying in quality from the heavily philosophical along neo-stoic lines, to the sort of homely wisdom now found in advice columns of popular newspapers. The outstanding example of the latter type was Jacob Cats who, despite his relatively elevated social position, seems to have struck a chord with the aspirational middle classes of the day. Emblem books with a moralizing purpose were also popular in the early years of the century. In particular the Dutch appear to have had a taste both as writers and readers for verse expressing a peculiarly Protestant if not specifically Reformed piety. In this vein the intensity of the Remonstrant Dirk Rafaelsz. Camphuysen stands out from the mass of deeply worthy but hardly memorable verse, often written by ministers of the Reformed Church

for whom the production of such aids to piety was almost a part of their professional duties. The contemplative verse of Huygens was less openly didactic, and in his *Hofwijck* he uses a tour of the garden of his eponymous country house as a way to present his musings on life. Vondel wrote a mass of satirical and polemical verse on a wide range of political and religious issues but remained, despite what was eventually his towering reputation as a poet, something of an outsider in comparison to Hooft or Cats, not least because of his religious idiosyncracies, being brought up a Mennonite and converting to Catholicism as an adult.

Despite the paucity of theatres in the Republic, drama on classical lines was indispensable for any literature aiming to emulate the ancients, and the prolific Vondel was also a successful playwright. At one extreme was his political drama, *Palamedes or Murdered Innocence* (1625), ostensibly about a hero of the Trojan War but clearly referring to the fall of Oldenbarnevelt a few years before the play was written. His straightforward historical drama, *Gysbreght van Aemstel*, was less provocative, though it did include staging a Catholic Mass, which caused offence in the obvious quarters. At the other extreme were the great tragedies of his later years, mostly on biblical themes. Hooft was probably most admired for his lyric poetry but he also wrote historical dramas reflecting contemporary political preoccupations, such as *Baeto* with its references to the supposed Batavian origins of Dutch freedom. Comedy was also an acceptable genre, and even the usually high-minded Huygens did not find it beneath his dignity to write the rather earthy *Trijntje Cornelis*, but the most original comic dramatist was Bredero. Most comedies employed rather crude stereotypes to produce cheap laughs, perhaps because of the overriding desire to copy Latin models, but Bredero's work gives the impression of opening a window into the lives and language of ordinary people in the early seventeenth century and very specifically in Amsterdam. His *Spaansche Brabander*, despite being based on a Spanish source, is one of the few places in Dutch literature where the problems, not least the cultural clashes, arising from the massive immigration of the time figure prominently. On the whole, however, comedies and farces seem rather artificial productions, and are little more convincing than the equally stereotyped court intrigues of many of the more serious dramas.

The examples of Homer and especially Virgil meant that the epic was one of the most admired of literary genres, but it does not seem to have been able to take root in the Dutch Golden Age. Indeed, the epic was one of the relative failures of Renaissance literature in general and by the seventeenth century its conventions may have been too anachronistic even for writers steeped in the classics. There is certainly no Dutch equivalent of Milton's re-imagining of the epic poem in *Paradise Lost* though it might be suggested that Vondel's great verse dramas fill a very similar cultural niche. On the other hand, perhaps the taste for the exotic was satisfied by a new type of writing: the travellers' tales of adventures in the Americas, India and the Far East that were such a popular by-product of Dutch overseas expansion in this period. Similarly, for Protestants at least the struggle for salvation could take on epic proportions, notably in pietistic accounts of struggles with the temptations of earthly life. For the Dutch specifically, however, there was an epic that was much more immediate than Homer or Virgil and infinitely more realistic than medieval romances – the Revolt and the struggle for freedom from Spain. This subject was best, or more directly, treated in chronicles and histories, not epic verse.

Apart from the powerful influence of humanism on the educated elite, Dutch literature was shaped by the strength of publishing, the high and rising levels of literacy and the relative openness of a commercial society to ideas and examples from elsewhere. The Republic was a small country with open borders combined with intense trading and cultural links throughout northern Europe. This was not a society which could close itself off from outside influences, nor would most of its citizens have wished to do so. Despite the high levels of immigration, there does not seem to have been a great deal of resentment of newcomers and they seem to have been assimilated relatively easily. Immigrants were barred from government at all levels but otherwise in an expanding economy there were few restrictions on their economic activities, and the cultural impact of Southern Netherlanders in the early years of the century was considerable. Throughout the century most immigrants came to the towns of Holland and helped to sustain their rapid growth. Amsterdam had a notably high immigrant population which, together with its worldwide trading connections, made

it one of the most cosmopolitan cities in Europe. The Republic was as open to the movement of ideas as it was to that of goods and people, and it became something of an intellectual as well as a commercial entrepôt for Europe.

A negative influence was the weakness of the commercial theatre in the Republic. Plays were performed intermittently at various venues in Holland, and the amateur chambers of rhetoric had a considerable effect on the development of drama in the early decades of the century, but only in Amsterdam was there a permanent theatre presenting plays on a regular basis. Part of the problem was the disapproval of the theatre in general by the Reformed Church: apart from objecting to acting itself on moral grounds – pretending to be somebody other than you really were was a deception – the theatre was seen as a temptation and an occasion for sin as it brought people of both sexes and from a variety of social backgrounds into close and unsupervised proximity. (Dance was similarly suspect as again it brought the sexes together in a way likely to excite the senses, particularly if fired by drink as well as music.) Actors who were members of the Reformed Church could be refused communion unless and until they gave up their profession. Despite the disapproval of the pious, enough actors could be found to perform, not only at the Amsterdam Schouwburg, but also on other often less formal stages, and at least one troupe is known to have put on performances in northern Germany and Scandinavia.<sup>7</sup> Thus despite the weakness of the infrastructure at home, it seems that the Dutch theatre was able to make some impact abroad. The language barrier was apparently not such a great obstacle to communication in areas where Low German was spoken or understood, and the practice of presenting dumb shows – miming the contents of the scene which followed – must have helped to make the performances intelligible to non-Dutch audiences. The attempt to emulate classic drama clashed to some extent as far as the Amsterdam Schouwburg was concerned with the desire to attract an audience rather larger than a handful of literary connoisseurs. Popular and classical were never going to be entirely compatible but a combination of comedies and farces with notably bloodthirsty tragedies seems to have done the trick, helped by increasingly elaborate and impressive stage settings and machinery. However, the theatre had to contend with a second wave of classical

influence in the later part of the century under the influence of the rigorous classicism of contemporary French theatre – which was following, in part at least, the rules codified by Dutch humanists in the earlier years of the seventeenth century.

The relatively high levels of literacy in the Republic meant that there was a large potential readership for works of literature, and the strength of Dutch publishing meant that there was a way that this public could be reached. Oral culture was still strong, but print was becoming ever more important in private as well as public life, and the impact of regular reading of the Bible should not be underestimated. A new translation of the Bible into Dutch was commissioned by the States General in the aftermath of the Synod of Dordt (1619) and completed by the 1630s, and for Protestant households at least a copy of the *Staten-Bijbel* became a necessary part of the furniture. This large and growing reading public was served by a greater density of publishers and printers than anywhere else in Europe. There were publishers with an international reputation specializing in learned works such as Elsevier, and some able to set type not only in Hebrew but also in other Middle Eastern languages useful for biblical studies, but more important for Dutch literature were the more general printers producing a wide range of books, pamphlets and fly-sheets in Dutch, both in gothic and roman letterpress. It used to be thought that gothic type was aimed at a popular readership and roman for the well-educated, but it seems that the both types could be and were read by all and so this complication for the printed language did little to hinder the growing reach of printed materials in the Republic. The existence of such a large number of printers is, of course, not just evidence for the availability of printed matter but also of the avidity with which the Dutch consumed print culture. It took a great number of buyers and readers to keep so many printing presses going.

If not the greatest achievement of Dutch writers in the Golden Age, then at least the one with most significant long-term impact, was the creation of a standard language. At the end of the sixteenth century a number of dialects of Dutch were spoken in the new state and these merged into varieties of Low German in the east. In addition dialects of a separate language, Fries, were used in the north. These various dialects were more or less mutually intelligible and

even Fries was not too difficult for a Dutch speaker to understand with a little patience, but there was no accepted common form of the language. What the writers of the seventeenth century achieved was the creation, by the conscious effort of some and as a side effect of the literary efforts of others, of a standard Dutch based largely on the dialect of the most populous and wealthy province, Holland, with some borrowings from other dialects particularly that of Brabant. Of course, most people continued to speak their own versions of Dutch but there was now a common cultured language for use in government and administration – and more importantly perhaps in literature. This new language proved flexible enough to absorb outside influences and strong enough to persuade immigrants to adopt it. The people of the Northern Netherlands had founded a state and developed a common language by the end of the seventeenth century and so had at least laid solid foundations for a new national identity.

In this period history was considered to be first and foremost a part of literature. It was regarded as a branch of rhetoric, the art of persuasion, and was concerned essentially with drawing out the moral and political significance of known events in the past and not with research in the modern sense. Antiquarians studied old manuscripts, collected and catalogued old coins, and concerned themselves with the dating and authentication of documents; historians were concerned with higher things. Dutch historians in the early seventeenth century had the politically important task of explaining and justifying the Revolt, and historical accuracy often came a poor second to the service of this higher purpose. They were far from being alone in this: much of the history written in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe was written in support of contending religious or political interests, and in the process useful myths were routinely preferred to mundane evidence. Such an approach to history was not necessarily as cynical as it may seem, as there was very little reliable knowledge of European history from the fall of the Roman Empire to the Renaissance, and this left a great deal of room for what one might charitably call imaginative reconstruction. In any case, eloquence was regarded as more important than accuracy; the historian was expected to tell the story well and thus to inspire patriotism and virtue in his readers.

In his epic history of the Revolt, Hooft was concerned to tell a true story and sought out eyewitnesses as well as consulting chronicles and other written evidence, but he was nevertheless a poet and playwright and his *Neederlandsche Historiën* was essentially a work of literature. He took the Roman historian Tacitus as his model and prepared for his great work by writing a history of the life of the French king Henri IV, who despite his unwilling conversion to the Catholic Church remained something of a Protestant hero. Hooft's history was intended to be a model of Dutch prose and thus to be a contribution to the creation of a language worthy of the new state whose birth it was celebrating. In contrast Hugo Grotius' *De antiquitate reipublicae batavicae* was originally written in Latin, and was a justification of the Revolt through tracing the freedom of the people of the Netherlands back to the Batavian resistance to Roman power under the leadership of Julius Civilis (celebrated by Rembrandt in his painting for the new town hall of Amsterdam). It was an unashamed humanist exercise in historical myth-making, written in elegant Latin and intended as a justification for both the Revolt and the political system which governed the Republic. Underlying the significance of this type of history was the assumption that every state should be ruled as it had been at the time of its foundation, and that any change after that point was by definition illegitimate. The core of Grotius' argument was that the Revolt had not been a rising against properly constituted authority, but on the contrary had restored the Netherlands – or at least the provinces which made up the Republic – to its legitimate form of government. Thus this essay in historical myth became a semi-official justification of the new state in the eyes of the rest of Europe.

The compilation of chronicles was a very different approach to the past, but hardly history in the eyes of contemporaries in the sense that they had no particular status as literature. The chronicles of Bor and Van Meteren provided reliable information for the period of the Revolt in chronological order, and became themselves in due course valuable sources through citing letters and other documents from the time, often in full. There were also numerous town chronicles expressing the pride of the booming towns of Holland, often occupying an uneasy middle ground between myth-making and antiquarianism. More intriguing were the writings of Lieuwe van

Aitzema, multi-volumed compilations on the politics of his time, containing a mass of inside information and gossip, not all of it reliable, filtered through a notably cynical consciousness. His major work, *Saken van staet en oorlogh*, was published in no less than 14 volumes between 1657 and 1671 and covered the period from the end of the Truce with Spain in 1621 to 1669. It says much for the public appetite for reading as well as for politics that this massive work sold as well as it did (and was republished only a few years later). Aitzema undoubtedly abused his position as a minor diplomat to gain his information, but the political system was notoriously leaky in any case, and his writings are best seen as evidence for what political insiders knew or thought they knew but which was not normally made public. They have certainly been plundered mercilessly by later historians, often with more enthusiasm than discrimination. The works of Gerard Brandt, in contrast, combine the method of the chronicler with the aims of the conventional historian. He was a Remonstrant minister and writer of occasional verse as well as an historian, and his major work was in name a history of the Reformation in the Netherlands published in four volumes (1671–1704), but the last three of these were solely concerned with the Remonstrant–Contra-remonstrant conflict of the early years of the century. Following the example of the chroniclers, he included such a mass of documentary material that it overloaded the text, yet he combined this with an unashamedly Remonstrant interpretation of the events. His lives of Vondel and of the naval hero Michiel Adriaensz. de Ruyter were also unusual in that they were attempts at serious biography rather than simple eulogies, and in some ways he seems to have more in common with historians of the eighteenth century than those of the early seventeenth.

Historical research in this period was the province not of historians but of antiquarians. Whereas writers of history were primarily literary figures, antiquarians were concerned with gathering and evaluating evidence from the past, such as documents, inscriptions and coins, rather than producing readable history. In the course of the Golden Age such unspectacular research began the laborious process of clearing away the myths and misconceptions obscuring the past of the Low Countries, and laying the groundwork for a better understanding of its history. Among other techniques, antiquarians



deployed the critical tools which the humanists had developed to establish reliable texts for the classics of ancient Greece and Rome, and in doing so began to place documents more clearly in their historical context. It is in this process rather than in the work of historians proper that a new sense of the past began to emerge, though as yet hesitantly and imperfectly. Antiquarians were, however, far from completely free of the preconceptions of the time and there was still a tendency to ask the wrong questions. For example, there was a major controversy between the antiquarians of Holland and Gelderland over where the Batavians had lived and thus which province could legitimately claim to be their true descendant. It was only at the end of the following century that the Batavian myth was successfully demystified; up to that point it seems to have been too important a part of the identity of the Republic, or at least of the legitimation of the regent regime, to be easily given up.

The literature of the Golden Age shows more clearly even than art the power of the conventional in a period of rapid change. The politically and socially dominant groups in Dutch society were conditioned by their education to the belief that the ideal of literary greatness had already been attained by the Greeks and Romans and that all that was left for contemporaries to do was to strive to match their achievements. The classics were studied to establish the rules governing literary composition, and any deviation from these rules was regarded as a flaw. In this view change or innovation was necessarily a corruption of the ideal. The Renaissance had sought not to innovate but to give new life – literally re-birth – to ancient civilization. The Reformation had aimed to return to the purity of the early church by sweeping away the corruptions which had transformed the Catholic Church over the centuries. The Dutch Revolt, too, was presented as a return to the way the country had been ruled at its foundation. In this way of thinking innovation was by definition wrong, and change had to be disguised as reform. For literature this meant that the criteria for excellence established by the Renaissance continued largely unchallenged throughout the Golden Age, and indeed their hold was even strengthened by the influence of French classicism in the later years of the century.

The education provided by the Latin schools and private tutors also filled the minds and imaginations of privileged youth with

classical history and mythology. Consequently plays and poetry took their subjects from the classics, and their works were filled with references to classical literature to such an extent that it sometimes seems that the authors could only see their own time through classical spectacles. However, it is perhaps misleading to see only the classicist trappings of the literature of the period: Hooft's *Baeto* as much as Grotius' historical myth-making was addressing an urgent contemporary problem through classical references. Also, in both education and literature there was a powerful Protestant influence that made biblical references as pervasive as classical and that could reach much broader sections of society. Despite the apparent dominance of classical rules and sensibilities, the writings of Bredero, Hooft, Huygens, Vondel and Cats produced something new in Dutch literature and they were more a product of their own times than some of them may have realized or, indeed, have wished.

Yet non-literary publications provide a more direct reaction to the changes taking place in Dutch society. Prose writings of no great literary pretensions in pamphlets, newsletters, travel accounts and lurid reports of prodigies provide a continuous commentary on the century. Almanacs combining useful information with less useful predictions were very popular for most of the century, as were stories of remarkable natural phenomena, such as battles seen in the sky, which were taken seriously as omens. There was also a proliferation of episodic adventures, written in prose, often blurring fact and fiction, replacing verse romance and epics to some extent yet not quite novels. (The first generally recognized novel in Dutch only appeared in the late eighteenth century.) In general the century sees prose beginning to take over from verse in a number of areas, paralleling the shift from an oral to a written culture. The end of the magical universe decisively weakened the tendency to conceive of the world in terms of metaphors and analogies, while the undermining of a noble culture based on honour through the triumph of capitalism in the Republic also encouraged a more prosaic evaluation of actions and motives. Such developments were far from complete by the end of the century, and as far as literature is concerned are obscured by the lack of poets or playwrights in the later seventeenth century of anything like the ability of the leading writers of the Golden Age. Dutch had certainly triumphed and Latin

verse was now reduced to the status of a schoolboy's exercise – girls on the whole did not learn Latin – but Dutch drama and verse was now subservient to the rules of French classicism and the future seemed to lie with prose.

## 6

# Humanism and the Republic of Letters

In the sixteenth century the Low Countries were a major centre of humanist learning, and produced two of its most important figures – Erasmus at the beginning of the century and Lipsius at its end. It formed the main link between southern and northern Europe for the transmission of the Renaissance, and had already begun to rival Italy and France as the foremost intellectual centre in Europe by the beginning of the Golden Age. Subsequently, the foundation of new universities in the Republic and the increasing strength of publishing in the country helped to ensure that this position as the intellectual leader of northern Europe would be consolidated and, indeed, extended to the whole continent, though by the last decades of the seventeenth century this leadership had taken a very different form. By this time learned periodicals had replaced the published correspondence of humanists, and the universities were being increasingly sidelined as far as intellectual leadership and innovation was concerned.

Erasmus had been the most renowned humanist in early sixteenth-century Europe. He was born in Rotterdam and can probably be regarded as a Netherlander in spirit as well as by birth despite his international fame and the fact that he spent most of his adult life outside the Low Countries. Among those who could read Latin his writings became enormously popular, particularly the satirical classic *In Praise of Folly*. His mordant criticism of corruption within the Catholic Church helped to prepare the ground for the Reformation, but his non-dogmatic form of Christianity became swamped by the religious conflicts of his time. Lipsius was born in Brabant and lived through the period of the Revolt and the beginning of the subsequent war between the Republic and Spain. He accepted a chair at the new

university of Leiden, but then switched sides again and returned to the Catholic university of Louvain in the Spanish Netherlands. He spent much of his adult life oscillating between sides in the conflict in the Netherlands, and it is perhaps ironic that his major work – an exposition of neo-Stoic thought – was entitled *Of Constancy*. However, just as Erasmus tried to make fence-sitting a viable theological position, so there is a certain consistency in Lipsius' search for firm moral and philosophical ground in a situation where it seemed only the least bad alternative was available.

Humanism in the Low Countries was already developing a distinctive character before the Revolt, and Erasmus came to stand for an aversion to religious coercion which was not only to become a particularly powerful component of Dutch thought but also had a notable effect on the rest of Europe, though the impact outside the Republic was more diffuse and had rather less influential. This leaning towards a degree of toleration was strengthened by revulsion against the severe persecution inflicted on Protestants in the Low Countries by the Spanish regime, and by the repressive measures taken by Alva's Council of Blood in particular. This was not just a scholarly squeamishness but had an unmistakeable effect on the political decisions of the regents as well. Such attitudes were in sharp contrast to the rest of Europe, where tolerant ideas found it more difficult to make headway in face of an intellectual consensus that equated religious dissent with political disobedience. The neo-Stoicism championed by Lipsius, however, seems to have found a more receptive audience in a Europe riven by religious and political conflict. The impact of this intellectual movement was particularly strong in northern Europe, where it provided individuals with a philosophy to help them through troubled times.<sup>1</sup>

Leiden was relieved in 1574 after a long siege and the following year, as a reward, the first university in the northern Netherlands was founded there. Subsequently, universities were also set up in Franeker (1585) in Friesland, Groningen (1614), Utrecht (1636) and Harderwijk (1648) in Gelderland. One of the main reasons for these foundations was to provide training for ministers for the Reformed Church, though it was some time before Leiden was producing a sufficient number of candidates for the ministry. Another purpose was to provide a legal education for future politicians and administrators of the new state,

and the new universities soon began to look like traditional institutions centred on medicine as well as law and theology. However, they also gave employment to classical scholars, and much of the prestige which accrued to Leiden came from a lineage of humanists of European reputation which it was able to attract even in its early years. A further stimulus to classical education and scholarship came from the creation of illustrious schools, without the right to award degrees but often able to establish a considerable reputation. Undoubtedly, the most important of these was the Athenaeum in Amsterdam, founded in 1632, and taking advantage of the fact that a number of leading scholars had been forced out of Leiden because of their Remonstrant sympathies, notably the leading humanist Gerard Vossius, who was appointed its first rector. Despite Leiden's early difficulties, Dutch universities soon became established as among the most distinguished in northern Europe through the quality of their professorial bodies and the sometimes innovatory nature of their instruction, at least in medicine, for example, where actual dissections were allowed to supplement traditional teaching in anatomy. Their European influence was given a notable boost during the Thirty Years War, when students from all over Germany and northern Europe in general were driven by the wholesale disruption of the region to the relative peace and security of the Dutch Republic. The faculties of theology in the new Dutch universities were also quickly able to take a lead in Reformed theology, as most German universities were rigidly Lutheran, and those in the Reformed sphere suffered badly during the Thirty Years War. At the same time the centres of Reformed learning in France were coming under pressure from an increasingly hostile government after the death of Henri IV in 1610. This left only a somewhat moribund Geneva, the Scottish universities and English Puritan theologians to challenge Dutch leadership in this area.

For much of the first half of the seventeenth century Dutch humanism continued to flourish and strengthen its European reputation for exacting and even innovative scholarship. After Grotius, imprisoned as a result of Maurits' coup in 1618, escaped into exile, his reputation only increased, and his voluminous correspondence formed one of the most important intellectual networks of the first half of the century. His writings on religion and Dutch law and his ventures into biblical hermeneutics impressed and occasionally

A 1630s engraving of Hugo de Groot (Grotius).



outraged contemporaries, but in the long run it is his *De jure belli ac pacis* which has had the most enduring influence. This is often described as the founding work of modern international law, but it was read at the time as a major contribution to political theory. As such it is largely a synthesis of the work of the great sixteenth-century natural law thinkers, and it became something like an indispensable textbook of political theory, despite the essentially conservative nature of its scholarship. Grotius was enormously versatile – historian, lawyer, classicist, biblical scholar and popular theologian – but he was a towering figure in a movement which was already beginning to lose its purpose, and his work in the main summed up the achievement of Renaissance humanism rather than pointing the way forward. The one clear exception to this is his contribution to biblical hermeneutics: his approach to understanding the Bible was to seek to place texts in their historical context, and in doing so was part of a movement which was to revolutionize biblical studies in the long term, though it was inevitably highly controversial at the time. The most notorious contribution that

Grotius made to this debate was his reinterpretation of the prophecies regarding the Antichrist in *Revelations*: it had become Protestant orthodoxy to read this passage as referring to the pope, making the Catholic Church not just heretical but a tool of the devil. Grotius argued that the relevant passages, far from being an inspired prophecy, were a reference to persecutions of the early Christians by an historical Roman emperor at the time they were being written. This reinterpretation, of course, undermined the scriptural case for the identification of the papacy with Antichrist. Not coincidentally, perhaps, Grotius hoped for a reconciliation between Protestants and Catholics and this interpretation of a key text was grist to his ecumenical mill.

The Dutch were kept at the forefront of contemporary scholarship in the early seventeenth century by gifted humanists such as Daniel Heinsius, Gerard Johannes Vossius and the Huguenot exile Salmasius, with their researches into the linguistic and historical background of the Bible. However, while Vossius usually tried to keep his head down where acrimonious academic debates were concerned, Heinsius combined a formidable reputation with a thin skin, and Salmasius revelled in controversy, accusing Heinsius of plagiarizing the unpublished work of the great scholar Scaliger, and attacking Milton's defence of the execution of Charles I. Such notorious controversies, however, should not obscure the solid work that was being done, inside the universities as well as by the exiled Grotius and the internally semi-exiled Vossius, in bringing a knowledge of a whole range of near-Eastern languages and texts to bear on the understanding of the Bible. In the early sixteenth century Erasmus' Greek New Testament had played an important role in undermining the authority of the Church by casting doubt on the reliability of the Vulgate;<sup>2</sup> now these linguists pushed on through further study and comparisons of New Testament Greek, the language and history of the Old Testament and ancient translations of biblical texts in various oriental languages. Such research was carried out by humanists, not theologians – historians, orientalists and students of New Testament Greek – but these studies were in the main shaped by contemporary dogmatic concerns. The techniques employed by these scholars were potentially revolutionary, but the questions asked and the context in which they placed their work remained essentially conventional. After about the mid-century such issues began to seem



rather old-fashioned, and the dogmatic concerns which had obsessed Christians since before the Reformation began to appear less crucial as a new intellectual world began to take shape. The scholarship pursued by the humanists staffing the Dutch universities in all academic fields seemed increasingly peripheral to the pressing issues which emerged in the later seventeenth century, and the universities themselves played a less and less central role as far as the main philosophical and practical issues of the time were concerned.

The term *Republic of Letters* expressed an aspiration as much as a reality, but the idea of a Europe-wide imagined community of men of letters, sharing an education in, and a reverence for, the classics, was nevertheless a powerful ideal and to some extent at least it was able to transcend the religious conflicts of the post-Reformation period. Within this community, the circulation of ideas had received an enormous stimulation from the introduction of printing, but the chief means of communication remained extensive exchanges of letters between leading humanists. They wrote to each other to exchange ideas over the whole range of common intellectual concerns, from technical linguistic queries to moral and philosophical questions. Another function of such letters seems to have been to impress each other with the elegance of their Latin and the wealth and variety of, preferably obscure, classical references they were able to deploy. Humanists wrote while they breathed: the correspondence of Grotius, for example, fills seventeen very large volumes in its modern edition<sup>3</sup> and, though he is perhaps an extreme case, this nevertheless illustrates the humanists' dependence on letters as the main way of keeping in touch with what was going on in their world, and of claiming their place in it. The situation changed radically in the last two decades of the seventeenth century with the rise of a new publishing phenomenon in the Republic – the learned journal. These new periodicals aimed to act as a sort of entrepôt of ideas, collecting material from all over Europe in the form of extracts from the latest books, editing them in a series of fairly regularly appearing volumes and then distributing them throughout the continent.<sup>4</sup> For these journals were aimed primarily at a Europe-wide audience and consequently were written in a language which could reach the targeted readership. It is a sign of the times that the language most often used was French, although some of the journals were still in the established

international language, Latin, and even in Dutch. The latter, however, were aimed solely at a domestic readership – the Dutch, then as now, had no illusions about the willingness of foreigners to learn their language – and Latin would still remain a means of communication for the learned community of Europe for some time to come. Nevertheless, the use of the French language not only indicates that it had replaced Italian as the language of diplomacy and international relations in general, but also that these new periodicals were aiming at a decidedly wider readership than the learned correspondence of an earlier age. The Republic of Letters targeted by these journals extended far beyond university professors and other professional humanists. Throughout Europe, but most immediately evident in the west and the north, a new public of educated men and women was emerging which had an informed interest in philosophy, theology and natural philosophy as well as literature in general, and such cultured but not learned readers were evidently coming to be more comfortable with French than with Latin. The culture of the Renaissance was beginning to be replaced by what would become the culture of the Enlightenment, and the learned periodicals published in the Republic were a major indicator that such a change was taking place.

These journals also placed the Republic at the heart of this development in European culture. Holland in particular had the printing and publishing capacity, together with the requisite expertise, to produce such journals. Holland was already a major centre of the book trade in Europe and, indeed, publishing deserves to be recognized as an important Dutch export industry during the Golden Age, selling its goods and services to countries which lacked its abundant printing capacity and expertise, and which suffered from much more severe censorship – which means just about everywhere else in Europe. So Dutch publishing already had a network of useful contacts throughout Europe which could be used to promote the new printed product. The Republic had also high levels of literacy, and the steady stream of books flowing from its presses showed that there was an appetite for printed materials on a wide variety of subjects, from works of Puritan piety (often from English sources) to popular editions of the classics. In addition, it can be assumed that the innumerable pamphlets published during the century reached an even broader readership than

printed books. However, books were expensive, newspapers were strictly factual and restricted in their scope, and pamphlets too hit and miss to make them a reliable means of keeping up with the exciting intellectual developments of the later seventeenth century. The periodicals provided a way to keep in touch that was economical in terms of time as well as money. Dutch culture was peculiarly open to ideas and influences from outside its borders, and thus was well placed to redistribute this material throughout much of Europe. The Republic was also open to people fleeing persecution elsewhere, and one group of these played an important part in the promotion of the new journals.

The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 formally ended the limited toleration for French Protestants which had been in force for nearly a century, but in practice conditions had already been worsening for the Huguenots well before this, and many of them had fled to the Republic before the flood of emigration which was set off by the Revocation. These refugees included a good proportion of the surviving Huguenot social and intellectual elite, and among these were some with the knowledge and linguistic ability to found and run the learned journals which were being launched in this period. The most prominent of these was Pierre Bayle, who set up the first and most famous of these periodicals: the *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* in 1684. When the Protestant academy at Sedan was closed down by the French authorities in 1681, Bayle was offered a chair in philosophy and history at the illustrious school in Rotterdam and moved to the Republic in the same year. He has been called 'one of the founders of modern intellectual journalism',<sup>5</sup> having a gift for making difficult ideas comprehensible to a broad educated audience. He combined profound religious beliefs with a subversively sceptical intelligence, and his later *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1696) left little of the comforting orthodoxies of his time whole. Two years after the appearance of the *Nouvelles*, Jean le Clerc started the *Bibliothèque universelle et historique*. Le Clerc was also an immigrant, from Geneva, and was a professor at the Remonstrant seminary in Amsterdam. In general his position was rather more in what might be called the liberal Protestant mainstream than was the case with Bayle. The first such journal in Dutch, the *Boekzaal van Europe*, was produced in 1692 by Pieter Rabus, a Rotterdam publisher who played an important



Pierre Bayle.

role in Dutch intellectual life in the last years of the century. Aimed primarily at a domestic readership, it had to be somewhat more circumspect in its treatment of sensitive issues, religious questions in particular, than the periodicals in French or Latin, presumably because it might be expected to reach less cosmopolitan readers. In other respects it was similar to the others in consisting mainly of translated extracts from recently published books on a wide variety of subjects. (Indeed, a later version of the journal called itself – with more accuracy than elegance – the *Two-monthly Extracts*.)

During the Golden Age there was a transformation from a humanist culture – which, despite the increasing scope and depth of its understanding of ancient culture, was nevertheless fundamentally conservative – to a learned culture that felt it necessary to go beyond the classical heritage. The starting point for Renaissance humanism was an inherited body of texts of unchallengeable authority, and the task of scholarship was essentially to explore this legacy. In the

pre-Enlightenment of the later seventeenth century innovation was no longer a dirty word, and it had become possible to think in terms of progress. The Battle of the Books of the turn of the eighteenth century was about whether the civilization of the ancient world could be surpassed, not whether it could be successfully emulated. The literature of the ancient world was, of course, still read, and the classics remained the core of a cultured education – and indeed were, remarkably enough, to remain so until well into the twentieth century – but their authority was now being challenged in nearly all areas. The status of classical literature as the touchstone of quality for literature in the narrow sense was still largely in place, but as far as philosophy, medicine and natural philosophy (that is, what is now thought of as science) were concerned the authority of ancient learning had suffered severe damage.

One of the most important aspects of this transformation was the replacement of authoritative texts by observation and experiment. The type of dissections that took place in the anatomical theatres depicted by Rembrandt (*The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*; *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Joan Deijman*) clearly demonstrated that the classical medical texts, including those of the revered Galen, were quite simply wrong on a number of important anatomical matters. More broadly, intensified observation of nature was not just putting ancient wisdom in doubt, it was providing entirely new knowledge. At the beginning of the century nature was understood through authoritative texts: the observation of any natural phenomenon was given meaning through the context of a proliferation of quotations and citations, either from classical literature or the Bible, or both. The orthodox Christian way of understanding nature, for example, was through the Bible. In other words, what was important about natural phenomena was their moral, religious and spiritual significance, and this could only be revealed through the Bible. From this point of view the living world was not particularly interesting in itself but only in so far as it could be made to provide uplifting religious and moral messages. Consequently the extent of interest in nature was severely limited: the lives of insects, for example, were used to illustrate religious and moral truths but only a few types were used – bees, ants – and beyond these there was very little concern for the enormous proliferation of insects in both numbers and types. By the

end of the century, in sharp contrast, the Book of Nature was being represented as a second and independent revelation from God, in addition to the Bible.<sup>6</sup> In consequence, the whole of the natural world came to be seen as deserving of respect, both as an expression of God's power and as a reflection of His nature. The decisive turning point in this transformation can tentatively be placed in the third quarter of the seventeenth century which is also, not coincidentally, the period when science more generally was throwing off the shackles of the classical scientific texts, and Aristotelian philosophy was seriously challenged in the Republic under the influence of the writings of Descartes.

Similarly, though on a rather different time-scale, biblical hermeneutics was beginning to subjugate the sacred text to history rather than understanding history through the Bible, so here again instead of understanding the world through an authoritative text, the text was being reinterpreted by means of human knowledge. The practical consequences could be quite significant: undermining the Protestant identification of the pope with Antichrist, if it did not make reconciliation between Protestants and Catholics any more likely, it did make less antagonistic relations between the churches at least possible. Similarly, some of the force of the Old Testament admonition not to allow witches to live was taken away when it was shown that the reference to witches was a mistranslation.

It has been argued that the defining characteristic of Dutch seventeenth-century painting, and perhaps of Dutch culture as a whole in this period, was a concern for careful observation and description of the material world.<sup>7</sup> Whatever may be the case with art, such an unmediated relationship with experience was not typical of the literary and intellectual culture of the early years of the century. Texts were the dominant mode of experience: the Bible after all was accepted as the literal word of God and thus infinitely more reliable than fallible human senses. The Devil was above all a deceiver and humans all too likely to be deceived through tricks of sight, hearing, touch and smell. So the world ought to be seen and experienced through the light of the Word, and Scripture trumped the evidence of the senses. The body of classical texts too was regarded as the indispensable foundation of all branches of knowledge. This essentially conservative attitude dominated teaching at the Dutch universities,

and academics in particular put up a determined resistance to the innovations in science, medicine and philosophy which emerged in the later years of the century. This is hardly surprising: their laborious and lengthy training from childhood onwards in classical learning represented an enormous personal and emotional investment which was not easily set aside. Despite the power of these conservative forces, however, by the turn of the eighteenth century observation and experiment were throwing off the shackles of the text. Immediate experience of God's creation was coming to be accepted, alongside the Bible, as a valid mode of understanding, and in the Battle of the Books the authority of the corpus of classical learning was being vigorously challenged. The essentials of the Early Enlightenment, with its rational criticism and even scepticism with regard to received ideas, were already firmly established in the Republic before the end of the century.

## Science and Technology

If the Dutch Golden Age was characterized by a struggle between inherited modes of thought and action and a decisive break with the past, science and technology might be thought to be clearly and necessarily on the side of change. After all, this is the period of what has become known as the scientific revolution, seen as replacing a magical universe infused with spirit with a material universe understood through the action of mathematically calculable physical forces. However, quite apart from the numerous question marks that have been placed round the very idea of a revolution in science, it is clear that such a traumatic break with the past could not have come out of nowhere, nor could it have superseded conventional thinking as quickly and completely as the term revolution might suggest. Certainly in the Dutch case conventional modes of understanding the world proved notably resilient, despite the important contribution made by Dutch thinkers and researchers to the advance of modern science in this period. The strength of resistance to the new ideas was not just a matter of refusing to throw off clearly mistaken theories or cast aside superstitions. Whereas the conventional alliance of Aristotelian science and Christian theology provided a coherent and consistent world-view, the new science at this time could offer little in the way of an alternative belief system which was as comprehensive and internally coherent as that which it was challenging. For many what was disturbing about the claims of this new form of natural philosophy was that it sought to destroy the old certainties while offering only very partial substitutes for them. It was some time before it became clear that the new science was different from the old natural philosophy, not only in its methods but just as importantly in the questions it was able to answer. In the end it proved



possible to construct an alliance between theology and the new science, though the latter could never provide as comprehensive a set of answers to questions concerning the meaning of life as the old system had.

In retrospect it seems clear that one of the main problems for the development of the new science was the inability of technology to keep pace with its theoretical advances. While scientific thought was moving towards a new understanding of reality, technology was as yet unable to make a parallel break with the limitations of the past. The early modern period in Europe was relatively barren in technological terms: at best it saw the refinement of existing technologies, but there were few if any significant developments at a fundamental level. From this perspective the seventeenth century seems to be more at the end of the medieval period than at the beginning of the new. The basic limitation lay in the sources of power available for human exploitation: these were still restricted to wind, water and, above all, human and animal muscle. (The explosive properties of gunpowder were used to some extent in mining, but mostly were applied to the development of weapons for war, hunting and civil violence: muskets and cannon.) Dutch trade by sea, both within and outside Europe, depended on sailing ships powered by wind; internal trade on sailing boats and barges. Moving goods, and indeed people, over land was slow and expensive: carts and coaches had to be pulled by horses or mules, and the lack of paved roads restricted the speed of travel, and meant that carts and animals all too often got bogged down in wet weather. To an extent such technological limitations were an advantage to the Dutch as they were better placed than most to exploit the existing technology efficiently: they enjoyed easy access to the sea, and their wealth of rivers, lakes and canals meant that practically every corner of the country could be reached by water. The passenger-barge network that was built up from the 1630s onwards is a prime example of the Dutch ability to exploit existing technology to the full: the specially dug canals and services that followed a regular timetable give an impression of modernity, but they still depended literally on horsepower.<sup>1</sup> Extensive use was made of wind and water power for mills serving a variety of purposes, but manufacture remained in the main just that: made by hand. The great textile industries of Leiden and Haarlem made use of fulling-mills,

but spinning, weaving, dyeing and shearing were done by hand, or by hand and/or foot powered machines.

The Dutch Golden Age was thus a period of technological ingenuity rather than rapid development or fundamental change. This is particularly clear in the case of ship design: towards the end of the sixteenth century the *fluit* emerged as an efficient cargo carrier, and throughout the seventeenth century the Dutch continued to produce a wide variety of efficient merchant ships built on similar lines. However, throughout the period Dutch shipbuilders produced craft which were built according to tried and tested models, and they proved resistant to any theoretical development in ship design. Consequently, there were no major innovations after the development of the *fluit*. Similarly, the Dutch exploited the existing technology of windmills very effectively rather than making significant improvements in design, apart from the gearing system which allowed just the top of the windmill to be turned to use the prevailing wind more efficiently. It was the number of windmills employed, and the variety of uses found for them, that was most characteristic of the Dutch exploitation of this piece of technology. Without the employment of whole batteries of wind-driven pumps, the drainage enterprises which transformed the landscape of Holland would have been impossible, and sawmills helped to make the Dutch shipbuilding industry the most efficient in Europe at the time. The invention of a land yacht by the mathematician and engineer Simon Stevin was ingenious but of little or no practical use, and wheels and sails were no technological breakthrough in any case. There were some improvements which at the very least can be regarded as significant innovations, such as the pendulum chronometer designed by Christiaan Huygens in the 1650s which was intended to aid navigation at sea. The Dutch also took the lead in the development of better lenses for telescopes and microscopes and, particularly in the case of the latter, the increased magnification that resulted enabled Swammerdam and Leeuwenhoek among others to achieve quite unprecedented results. Here at least the exploitation of an existing technology approached the level of true innovation, and opened up a whole new world of microscopic creatures for observation.

Unfortunately, the discovery of life at this microscopic level made a major weakness of seventeenth-century science all too obvious –

there was no theory available which could help to make sense of these new observations. In general, the rise of the new science represented a fundamental threat to established philosophy and religion. The implications of the new discoveries in astronomy, from the heliocentric theory of Copernicus in the sixteenth century to the observations of Galileo in the seventeenth, were seen as challenging Christianity's claim to truth as well as conventional thinking in natural philosophy. This was not a simple question of hide-bound conservatism, still less of superstition, but rather a recognition of the extent of the intellectual and even moral implications of such corrosive ideas. Divine revelation was fundamental to the conventional understanding of the world, yet many passages in the Bible were, if interpreted literally, incompatible with the new cosmology. Such new ideas about the nature of the universe were not necessarily irreconcilable with Christianity, and most if not all scientists continued to be believers, but at the very least they raised very tricky questions about how properly to interpret Scripture. The issue, in the end, was the nature of truth and the best way to reach it. In conventional thinking, the only reliable source of truth was God as revealed in the Bible; human observation was inherently unreliable because it was the work of corrupt minds and bodies. As a consequence of the Fall humans were mired in sin, and the senses possessed by the sinful body could not be trusted to see or feel things as they really were, still less to understand them. The Devil, after all, was a master of illusion, and so discoveries made through the flawed senses of men – and even more so, women – could be satanic deceptions, especially if they appeared to contradict Christian teachings. Given the fundamental assumptions of the time, there was every reason to prefer the Word of God to the observations of men.

To a degree such problems arose from what might be considered a category error: the confusion of science with philosophy. The standard term in this period for what would come to be called science was natural philosophy, and the philosophical system of Aristotle was regarded as providing the basis for scientific theory as well as metaphysics and, suitably modified to Christian ends, theology. This meant that, on the one hand, scientific thinking was hampered by preconceptions as to how things should be which were derived from philosophical principles, while on the other, discoveries in science

which upset such preconceptions could be seen as having repercussions far beyond mere science. The first great challenge in the seventeenth century to the hegemony of Aristotelian philosophy came from the French philosopher René Descartes, whose aim was to strip philosophy down to the absolutely incontrovertible ('I think, therefore I am') and rebuild from there. Such radical scepticism was regarded, rightly, as a threat as much to conventional theology as to philosophy. The new philosophy began to have a considerable impact on intellectual circles in the Republic from the fifth decade of the century but, whereas its influence on philosophy and theology was on the whole positive, in the end it proved considerably less useful to the new science. The problem was that Descartes also subsumed scientific questions into philosophy, and all too often this meant that reasoning from first principles was allowed to trump observation. Despite the undeniable stimulus given to scientific thinking by Cartesian scepticism, when Descartes himself strayed into science the result was all too often unhelpful.

If there was a scientific revolution in this century – as opposed to a large number of scientific discoveries in various fields over a considerable period of time – it lay perhaps in the substitution of material forces for moral and spiritual powers in explaining natural phenomena. Gravity was a measurable – in principle – material force, though given the difficulty of seeing just how it worked many contemporaries saw it as suspiciously like the action of an invisible spirit and thus still an aspect of the magical universe. While scientific observation and experiment revealed more and more about the world, it proved incapable of answering a whole range of questions dealt with by philosophy and theology. Science, it seemed, could explain why the apple fell from the tree but could say nothing about the meaning of life. In time Dutch scientists and theologians would be able to find common ground in the idea that nature should be seen as a separate and equal revelation alongside scripture. The Book of Nature was no longer to be understood through the Bible but was to be studied on its own terms.<sup>2</sup> Such thinking provided a spiritual significance for entomology as much as cosmology, though in an important sense it still subordinated science to religion. To this extent even in the eighteenth century traditional religious values still hampered the development of an independent modern science.

The pervasive influence of Descartes and the spate of scientific developments came together with a number of millenarian movements to make the third quarter of the century a period of particularly intense intellectual and spiritual turmoil for the Dutch. These disturbances contributed to the fundamental change in Dutch culture that had taken place by the beginning of the eighteenth century; the Renaissance was finally giving way to the Enlightenment. On the other hand, the brief period when Dutch researchers and thinkers were among the leaders of European science ended with the deaths of Swammerdam (1680) and Christiaan Huygens (1695). Similarly, the Dutch appear to have exhausted their appetite for technological ingenuity and become reliant on rule-of-thumb methods rather than confident innovation. Most surprisingly, while the Dutch stuck to the tried and true, it was left to English and French shipbuilders to pursue new and improved designs for ships. Caution or complacency seems to a large extent to have replaced confident innovation by the end of the century as far as technology is concerned.

The development of Dutch science in the seventeenth century was hindered by the lack of any real institutional support. In common with those in the rest of Europe, Dutch universities were essentially repositories of received wisdom, preserving and passing on inherited knowledge and understanding rather than being concerned with innovation or research in the modern sense. Humanists and linguists explored and developed the classical heritage; the focus for lawyers was the great corpus of Roman law; teaching in the faculties of medicine was based on Galen and the humoural theory of illness; and, of course, theologians expounded on scripture in the language of Aristotelian philosophy. It is true that Dutch universities were pioneers in using practical demonstrations of the dissection of human corpses rather than relying on ancient anatomical texts which all too often proved to be misleading if not downright wrong. On the whole, however, Dutch universities were hardly more receptive of the new ideas and discoveries in science than their counterparts in the rest of Europe. There were in any case no university chairs in any science subject, unless medicine can be considered a science. In the course of the seventeenth century, academies of science were set up in a number of countries, and in the later years of the period the most prominent were the Royal Society in England and the Académie des

Sciences in France, both enjoying royal patronage. No such centre for research was ever set up in the Dutch Republic. Dutch researchers could submit papers to the Royal Society and Christiaan Huygens was the first director of the Académie des Sciences, but there was no institution in the Republic which could serve as a forum in which discoveries could be shared and research co-ordinated. Dutch researchers were in the main on their own.

Why there was no Dutch academy of sciences is far from clear. Of course, both the French and English bodies were set up by the crown, and there was no monarch in the Republic, but it would have been possible for the States General or, more likely, the States of Holland to found such a body. The political system of the Republic allowed only very limited powers to the central government – foreign policy, direction of the armed forces, administration of the Generality Lands – and it was perpetually short of money because the reluctance of most provinces to pay their share of costs on time – or, in many cases, at all. Despite its prosperity, the Dutch Republic was under financial pressure almost throughout the century because of unavoidable military and naval expenditure. The French and English kings might have been able to spend money they did not have on pet projects, but no one in the Republic was in a position to do so – though it is conceivable that Frederik Hendrik or Willem III could have pushed such an idea through. However, the former died before the spate of scientific activity in the third quarter of the century, and the latter was probably too single-minded to spend time or money on anything so peripheral to his main political and strategic concerns. Also, provincial jealousies meant that no matter which province had been chosen to host the academy of science, the others would have objected to federal funds being used for this purpose. In fact, the extreme decentralization of political power in the Republic made any but the most urgent federal projects almost impossible.

Holland had the resources to set up such an institution, although competition between the leading towns to be the seat of such a prestigious body might well have been a problem. However, an academy founded by the States of Holland would not have had quite the cachet that royal patronage conferred, and its status would have been unclear. Perhaps this decentralized republican system was simply not very fertile ground for an institution offering no very

obvious economic benefits. It was not just that Generality bodies were kept on a very short lease by the provinces, but that the power of the states of the constituent provinces were also limited by the quasi-autonomy of the towns and nobles, particularly where it came to expenditure for anything but the most necessary ends. This was particularly true of Holland. The States of Holland were dominated by the eighteen towns represented in this assembly, and these towns were governed by regents with close links to trade and manufactures. It is true that in the course of the century the regents, certainly in the larger towns, tended to move closer to becoming full-time politicians and to drop direct involvement in commerce in favour of secure investments, notably in the provincial debt and shares in the VOC. Nevertheless they retained many of the instincts of the hard-headed Dutch merchant of an earlier generation and were not given to lavish expenditure on prestige projects – unless they reflected directly on themselves. It has to be added that although Holland was by far the most wealthy province in the Republic, it also carried a much higher financial burden. Holland was responsible for almost 60 per cent of the expenditure of the Republic, and it was borrowing by the States of Holland that had carried the Republic through the long war with Spain, and that financed the subsequent wars with England and France. By the mid-century the consequent burden of debt was enormous, and by the end of the War of Spanish Succession it was crippling. In these circumstances, the regents of Holland would have needed very strong incentives to agree to spend money on something as irrelevant to the war effort as an academy of sciences.

Perhaps in the end the explanation is a simple one: no single person, not even a prince of Orange, could command the resources and prestige of a king of France or England, and there was certainly no one whose patronage could confer similar prestige. There were individuals, merchants and financiers, who could have funded an academy, but such an institution would have lacked both professional authority and social status. Such a foundation might have been a boon for a few individual researchers – Swammerdam would have been delighted – but it would have had no more standing than any other private charitable foundation. In other words, it could not have carried out the function of the royal and princely foundations in other countries.

As a consequence, Dutch researchers had to look outside their own borders for some sort of official or professional recognition of their achievements and to gain publicity for their discoveries.

There were, however, aspects of the Dutch experience in this period which were distinctly more favourable to both technological and scientific development. The overall effects of the very many years of warfare that the Dutch had to endure during the seventeenth century have been much debated, but historians in general agree that the Dutch economy boomed despite rather than because these unavoidable – in most cases – wars. However, as far as science and technology are concerned, there is a case for suggesting that the positive effects of the Dutch experience of war outweighed the negative. This is particularly true of the long war with Spain which lasted from the Revolt until 1648, with only a brief suspension of hostilities from 1609 to 1621. The conflict with Spain was a forcing house for military engineering, and in particular the design and construction of fortifications.

One of the reasons that the rebels were able to hold out through the early years of the Revolt was that the topography of the northern Netherlands, Holland and Zeeland particularly, was peculiarly suited to defensive warfare, given the military conditions of the time. The large-scale introduction of cannon in the late fifteenth century, using gunpowder to fire first stone then metal balls, revolutionized siege warfare. The high, thin walls and towers of medieval fortifications had to be replaced by low thick walls capable of resisting cannon-fire, and in general depth of defence was substituted for height in the new fortification systems protecting towns and strongpoints. By the early sixteenth century a new system of fortification had been developed, the *trace italienne*, which combined such low thick walls with angled bastions, designed to make the most effective use of defensive fire-power. Moats and elaborate outworks were also employed to keep the attacking batteries of cannon at a distance from the main walls, and to make approach work difficult for the attacking forces. Starting in Italy, this new type of fortification spread steadily through Europe, but at the outbreak of the Revolt of the Netherlands there were few if any examples in the northern Netherlands. However, the low-lying nature of the land in Holland and Zeeland allowed for the rapid construction of quite effective defences through the use of mud and especially



water. Famously, the long siege of Leiden by Spanish troops was finally raised in 1574 when the dykes were broken, flooding much of the area between the town and the Maas to the south and thus enabling the relieving forces to reach it by water. As the war continued year after year the need for more permanent defences became ever more pressing, and Dutch military engineers began to develop a system of their own, based on the principles of the *trace italienne* but modified to suit the peculiar topography of the region.<sup>3</sup>

By the end of the sixteenth century a distinctive Dutch system had emerged, and a body of Dutch military engineers had been trained to design and build these new fortification, as well as providing vital practical services for a Dutch army which had already become one of the most effective in northern Europe. In the first decade of the seventeenth century Simon Stevin set up a course in military engineering at the University of Leiden, which was innovatory in two senses: first, it was essentially designed to provide practical instruction rather than theory, and concentrated on recent experience rather than classical examples; and second, the language of instruction was Dutch rather than Latin which was the usual medium of university instruction throughout Europe. In the end, however, this proved to be rather too radical an innovation and it petered out, and the training of engineers for the army reverted to the previous quasi-apprenticeship system. Nevertheless the influence of the Dutch style of fortifications spread through much of northwestern Europe as a result of their proven effectiveness. The Eighty Years War saw very few significant battles: the only memorable one was at Nieuwpoort in 1600 and, although this was a tactical victory for the army of Maurits of Nassau, it was a strategic defeat and left him reluctant to try anything quite so risky again. This war was a war of manoeuvre and small-scale clashes, with the major events being set-piece sieges. During the early phases of the Revolt the Dutch relied almost entirely on defensive warfare based on the effectiveness of the fortifications round their many towns. During this period the best that the rebels could do was hold on grimly and hope for foreign aid or a Spanish financial collapse. So it can be argued that one of the main reasons for the survival of the Revolt was the effectiveness of the fortifications surrounding their key towns and fortresses. Only in the 1590s did the Dutch field army – which has received a great deal of attention in accounts of

the Military Revolution – begin to play an important role, aided by the diversion of much of the Spanish Army of Flanders to France. Maurits and, later, Frederik Hendrik were the acknowledged contemporary masters of siege warfare, and they depended heavily on the skills of their engineers in attack as well as in defence. Mining defences, deploying cannon and the skilful use of approach trenches were vital contributions by military engineers to Dutch military success against the Spanish. In the later years of the seventeenth century the perceived threat to Dutch independence from France led to a renewed awareness of the importance of fortifications, and the Dutch engineer Menno van Coehoorn became almost as famous as his French counterpart, Vauban.

The need to redesign fortresses for the new type of warfare also fused with the Renaissance interest in utopias to stimulate thinking about the planning of ideal cities. Like the *trace italienne* this tendency had its origins in Italy and its most notable proponents in the early sixteenth century were Italian. During the first decades of the Revolt and the Eighty Years War such utopian considerations had to give way to more pressing and practical concerns, though they seem to have had considerable influence on the design of fortress towns such as Willemstad. In the event, there were few opportunities for building new cities in the Republic; the northern Netherlands was already highly urbanized and the Dutch were mainly concerned with the fortification of existing towns rather than the planning of new. However, it is interesting to note that besides his famous book on fortification (*De Sterctenbouwing*), Stevin also wrote a treatise on town planning, though this was only published after his death. In any case, the chief concern of urban planners in the seventeenth century was planning for the expansion of the leading Holland towns as a consequence of the population boom. Also, town planning in the Republic had always to bear in mind defensive considerations even in Holland although this province was almost completely free from incursions by enemy troops after the 1580s. The French invasion of 1672, which reached the borders of Holland and was held up largely by classic defensive inundations, was a harsh reminder to the Dutch of the danger of neglecting their fortifications. The failed attack on Amsterdam by Willem II in 1650 was also a reminder of the political importance of keeping towns defensible. So the experience of warfare both

stimulated and to an extent shaped the development of both military engineering and town planning in the Republic, and is a further reminder of the profound influence of war on this ostensibly peace-loving society.

Overseas expansion provided a less ambiguous stimulus to Dutch science and technology than warfare. Dutch explorers and traders to the Americas and Asia brought back a mass of intriguing information as well as commercial intelligence, and the foundation of factories, i.e. trading posts, and colonies in both regions only increased the flow. The establishment by the VOC of a trading empire in the East with its headquarters at Batavia – now Djakarta – in Java was especially important in this respect. The VOC had factories throughout the East, including both coasts of India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia and even Japan, and although the company's primary interest was the trade in spices – pepper, mace, saffron, cloves – it was always on the look-out for other products that might prove profitable. However, while such commercial considerations might have been important, over and above that there was a genuine scientific curiosity about the flora and fauna of Asia and the Americas. Consequently, besides commercial goods, the company's ships brought back innumerable specimens of plants, animals and birds. Many of these ended up in the collections of curiosities which were something of a vogue in the first half of the seventeenth century, but Dutch naturalists soon were no longer satisfied with simply seeing them as further evidence of the infinite fertility of Nature – or God – and began to study this evidence in a more systematic manner. Like other Europeans, the Dutch were particularly interested in discovering whether any of these plants had significant medicinal properties, and many had real or imagined therapeutic qualities attributed to them. What proved more important from a scientific point of view was the sheer profusion of types and species of both plants and animals that was revealed. The existence of such an enormous numbers of species, besides inspiring wonder, set puzzling questions which were not easily answered in terms of conventional thinking about the meaning of such natural phenomena. Apart from anything else most of these plants and animals were not mentioned in the Bible, and it was difficult to reconcile their existence with the belief that Nature had to be interpreted through scripture. From a moral or

spiritual point of view, much of nature's profusion seemed decidedly redundant, and such apparent profligacy demanded alternative – and perhaps more material – interpretations. The new specimens and the new knowledge that flowed into the Republic in the backwash of the formation of a worldwide trading empire provided the raw materials for a new approach to natural history.

Dutch dependence on seaborne trade also encouraged the development of better navigational aids. In European waters, seamen had been guided largely by rutters, which indicated landmarks to guide ships following coastlines, but travel to the Americas or to Asia round the Cape of Good Hope set considerably greater navigational problems. Reaching the New World meant sailing across the Atlantic, and it was soon discovered that the best sailing route for ships outward bound to the East Indies was to swing out to near the coast of Brazil, then back to the Cape. After the Dutch had established their base in Batavia, they began to sail straight from the Cape to Java rather than following the coastal routes mapped out earlier by the Portuguese. Such routes made it ever more important to be able to determine longitude with greater accuracy, and one of the requisites for this was a reliable chronometer for use at sea. In the end the problem of properly calculating longitude was only solved in the next century, but Christiaan Huygens did invent a more reliable chronometer to help with the problem. More obvious developments came in cartography, and the Dutch became the leading producers of charts and atlases in Europe in the seventeenth century. The Netherlands was already an important centre of map production in the sixteenth century, and the tradition of Mercator was carried on in the Republic by publishers such as Willem Jansz. Blaeu. The latter's world atlas did much to establish the popularity of this type of publication, and incidentally also helped to shift the boundaries between utility and art by the production of hand-coloured editions for the wealthy connoisseur.

The main achievements in Dutch science, however, came through careful observation of nature, and it is tempting to compare this with the equally careful depiction of physical reality which characterized Dutch painting. This readiness to trust the results of personal observation and experiment was a further step away from the reliance on authorities, whether scriptural or classical, which was the defining

characteristic of contemporary academic learning, as well as demonstrating a willingness to trust the evidence of one's eyes despite the supposed fallibility of the human senses. To put personal experience before the authority of the classics and to prefer experiment above the evidence to be found in the Bible marked a significant break with the past, the implications of which were only partly and imperfectly understood at the time. Even more radically, perhaps, this period marked a fundamental shift in the way in which phenomena were to be interpreted; spiritual causes were being replaced by material forces, magic by gravity, and religious meaning by mathematical calculation. This was the end of the magical universe, even though, perhaps, no-one at the time would have seen it in quite these terms; or, to put it another way, modern science was replacing natural philosophy as the most effective way of understanding the natural world.

This breakthrough came in the main in the spiritually and intellectually turbulent third quarter of the century, though it is perhaps more accurate to regard this period as one of a temporary acceleration of existing trends followed by a period of uneasy assimilation of the discoveries which had been made by a remarkable generation of researchers. It must be emphasized that the advances made by this group of researchers were not only hard-won, but in the circumstances of the time dissemination and verification of the findings was more than a little problematical. Conventional university opinion was reluctant to accept the findings of men who were, in their eyes, only half-educated, and such a challenge to established ways of thinking inevitably met with determined opposition from academics who had devoted most of their lives to traditional learning, as well as from those worried about the potential consequences for religion of this startling new information. Lacking institutional support and having to rely on word of mouth, letters and personal demonstrations of their findings, innovative scientists found it difficult to persuade a wider public of the validity of their observations. Explaining what they meant was an even more problematic task. It was always open to sceptics to cast doubt on their findings, or to offer alternative interpretations of the evidence to bring it more into line with conventional thinking. However, perhaps the greatest, and certainly the most insidious, problem was that these researchers did not, and could not, quite understand the significance of what they were discovering.

All were to some extent still in the magical universe and, while it was relatively easy to declare that careful anatomical investigations had proved Galen wrong in many respects, it proved much more difficult to divorce science from religion. In addition, it was all too often difficult to understand what was being uncovered because there was no alternative explanatory framework into which the observations could be placed. All too often researchers tried to fit their discoveries into conventional interpretative contexts and asked questions which led to investigative dead ends. Much time, for example, was spent on the search for evidence for the spontaneous generation of life. Such problems were at their most acute for the microscopists as they lacked the century or more of observations which the astronomers had behind them. Men like Swammerdam and Leeuwenhoek were discovering a truly new world.

Scientific development in the Republic in the second half of the century was shaped in particular by advances in microscopy. Telescopes had already been widely used since the beginning of the century, and had enabled considerable progress to be made in astronomy, but the use and design of microscopes was in its infancy, and the lenses used in this period were difficult both to make and to use. The lenses which produced the highest magnification at this time were tiny and needed to be held very close to the object that was being studied, and these characteristics led to problems both for the examination itself and for the reliable dissemination of the discoveries made by using them. This was partly because such work could be duplicated only by microscopists of equal technical skill and equipped with comparable lenses. Observations through telescopes were easier to check, and so when Christiaan Huygens discovered one of the moons of Saturn and the rings round the planet – or rather that the observed phenomena were ring-shaped – his work could readily be followed up and verified by others, with the result that more moons were found and the nature of the rings came to be better understood. In sharp contrast, when Jan Swammerdam began his series of startling discoveries about the bodies of mammals, amphibia and insects, there were only a handful of people who could match or even approach his skill in dissection, let alone in microscopy. Consequently his results could not easily be verified, and so could be challenged by both conservative opponents and jealous rivals. Financing his research was also a major problem

A 1680s portrait of Anthonie van Leeuwenhoek.



for Swammerdam as, although he had a degree in medicine, he had to rely on the charity of his reluctant father to support him while he carried out his investigations, since he was reluctant to take too much time from his research in order to start up a medical practice. His great strength was his ability to combine his skills in dissection and microscopy with careful observation of the lives of his subjects. His descriptions of the behaviour and metamorphoses of various insects, illustrated by meticulous drawings, were particularly impressive to sympathetic contemporaries. He worked systematically, even obsessively, to disclose the secrets of how the bodies of animals and insects worked. However, time and again his work threatened to be sidetracked by issues like the origins of life, which were either unanswerable or irrelevant to his main concerns – though it is decidedly anachronistic to put it that way.<sup>4</sup>

If the academically trained Swammerdam had problems relating his findings to the theoretical issues of his time, Anthonie van Leeuwenhoek made even more astounding observations through his microscopes, and had even less understanding of the significance of what he was able to see. He was a true amateur without a university

education – though he was a qualified surveyor – and carried out his remarkable researches in his spare time from his post as chamberlain to the court of the *schepenen* in Delft. He appears to have been almost entirely unsystematic in his approach, just applying his remarkable lenses to whatever took his fancy, including the innocent raindrop and human sperm – his own, collected, he hastened to explain, after conjugal intercourse and not from sinful masturbation.<sup>5</sup> His observations of microscopic creatures amazed and awed contemporaries but proved something of a scientific dead end, at least in the short and perhaps even in the medium term, as there was no theoretical context at the time which could give them meaning.

The other leading scientist of the second half of the century, Christiaan Huygens, came from an elite background – his father, Constantijn, as well as being a major literary figure had been secretary to Frederik Hendrik and continued to serve the house of Orange in senior positions for the rest of his life – and had enjoyed the best available education, including a Grand Tour, and had no difficulty establishing useful contacts throughout Europe. He earned the respect



A 1680s engraving of Christiaan Huygens.



of contemporaries as a physicist and astronomer, and was appointed director of the Académie des Sciences in Paris in 1666. His privileged social background ensured him a recognition and respect that his undoubted genius as a scientist alone might not have delivered. In science it was still the case that who you were could be as important as what you did as far as acceptance by contemporaries was concerned.

Underlying many of the problems facing Dutch – and other – scientists at this time was the difficulty of disentangling scientific from other forms of knowledge. Many still expected science to be able to reveal religious and philosophical truths, and were inevitably disappointed by the failure of scientific method to penetrate such mysteries. Inspired by the claim of Cartesian philosophy to be able to attain truth, Swammerdam sought to reach that tantalizing goal through observation and experiment, but his discoveries failed to satisfy what in the end appears to have been essentially a religious or spiritual quest for meaning and purpose in his life. In his state of spiritual need he was drawn to one of the many charismatic millenarians operating in and around the Republic at this time. Antoinette Bourignon claimed that God spoke directly to and through her, and that the only way to escape the imminent destruction of the world and achieve salvation was through complete obedience to her as the mouthpiece of God. Her message proved seductive to a number of people of intelligence and means, particularly perhaps the young and idealistic like Swammerdam. She told him that his scientific work was a pointless distraction from complete surrender to the will of God – through her, of course. For a while, he tried to draw away from his research and follow her directions, but in the end either the spiritual gain was too limited or the pull of his studies too great and he returned to science. Unfortunately, he died soon after in 1680 at the age of only forty-three. Swammerdam's crisis of conscience was perhaps an extreme reaction to the spiritual and intellectual challenges of the time, but such soul-searching was rather in the air. Christiaan Huygens seems to have experienced a crisis of faith, or rather lack of it, towards the end of his life, and the Amsterdam regent and statesman Coenraad van Beuningen was overwhelmed by what his friends and family labelled religious mania, but which seems not so different from the actions and beliefs of contemporary chiliasts. The distinction between science and religion was far from clear, and scientific and

magical thinking were still liable to overlap. It should be remembered that the greatest scientist of the century, Isaac Newton, was obsessed with numerological speculation, though it is perhaps equally significant that he kept quiet about this. The schism between science and religion was imminent but not yet either clear or complete.

## 8

# God and Truth

Where religion was concerned, the peculiar nature of Dutch seventeenth-century society went against the grain of the received wisdom of the time in Europe. The co-existence of a number of different churches and sects was conventionally seen as both wrong and dangerous. Theologians on all sides agreed that there was only one true church and only one path to salvation, and so a state which allowed more than one church within its borders was by definition tolerating error and blasphemy. Political philosophers added that a state divided in religion had to be dangerously unstable politically as well. The Dutch Republic from its very foundation presented a challenge to such conventional assumptions: it may not have been quite as tolerant as was once thought, but it did allow the persistence of a religiously pluralist society, though the degree of flexibility shown by the civil authorities was perhaps greater in Holland than in some of the other provinces. Similarly, while there were more limitations on freedom of speech and on the press than is sometimes recognized, nevertheless freedom of conscience was firmly established in practice, and the limits of the permissible in both speech and print were considerably wider than almost anywhere else in Europe at this time. This relatively tolerant atmosphere meant that there was a wide range of theological and philosophical speculation in the Republic, not only in private but also through the printed word. This situation persisted despite the power and influence of the Reformed Church, which stuck grimly to conventional views as to the proper relationship between church and state, and which never ceased trying to enforce its beliefs and practices on the Dutch population as a whole.

Throughout the seventeenth century the Republic was one of the most important centres of Reformed theology in Europe, and its

universities were among the leading lights of Reformed scholarship, especially as the Huguenot academies in France were first weakened and then finally closed by the government. However, conditions in the Republic also allowed a dissident religious culture to flourish and to express its beliefs with some freedom, though there were very definite and well-understood limits to this freedom. Whereas what might be termed mainstream dissenters (from Reformed orthodoxy, that is) such as the Remonstrants could publish more or less freely – at least after the brief period of official repression which followed immediately after the synod of Dordt in 1619 – more radical thinkers had to exercise a degree of caution as to what they published. It is perhaps not surprising that blasphemy and public expressions of atheism remained illegal; the problem for radical thinkers was that the definition of these two delicts could be deceptively wide. For example, denying the doctrine of the Trinity was defined by orthodox opinion as atheism, so socinians and later unitarians had to be circumspect not just about what they published but also about what they preached in public.

The position of the Reformed Church was both privileged and at the same time comparatively weak. It had been allowed to take over the existing churches for its services; its ministers were paid out of public funds and, after the triumph of orthodoxy at Dordt, in theory at least only its members could hold public office. Yet state and church were not coterminous in the Dutch Republic: Dutch citizens had no duty of membership of the Reformed Church, or even of attendance at its services. So, while the proportion of the population belonging to the dominant church increased in the course of the seventeenth century, it was never able to become the established church in the sense that all citizens of the state were expected to belong to it. This left the Church in a curious position: it was the official church of the Dutch state, all regents and officials were members, yet Protestant dissenters had full civil rights and, in effect, freedom of worship. Even Catholics had freedom of conscience, and as the century wore on they were increasingly able to hold their own religious services as long as they used a certain discretion – and paid the necessary fines to the local *baljuw* or *schout*. A further problem for the Reformed Church came from the claims of the civil authorities to a degree of control over its activities. Town governments insisted

on a say in the choice of ministers for their towns; the civil authorities kept a close eye on what provincial synods were up to; and the salaries of ministers who offended town or provincial authorities could be suspended. The Church could hope to have an unique degree of influence on government, but at the same time this meant that it could not be wholly independent of the secular authorities.

The relationship between church and state was a major theoretical problem, especially in the early years of the century, and it was one of the issues dividing the Remonstrants from their opponents. On the one hand it was generally recognized that the primary duty of the state was to protect and preserve the true faith, but the extent to which the Reformed Church could dictate what that meant in practice was disputed, with the Remonstrants willing to allow the secular powers a less ambiguous final authority than were the Contra-remonstrants. This is probably one of the reasons why so many regents in Holland were inclined to favour the Remonstrants, and it was certainly political considerations that brought Oldenbarnevelt to their side, although his own religious convictions inclined to the orthodox. The Contra-remonstrant victory at Dordt, however, did not in the long run increase the Church's influence on politics. Although from this point onwards only members of the Church were supposed to hold political office, the regents as a whole, whatever their religious position, were too jealous of their authority to defer too much to the Church, and they tended to reduce to a minimum the areas where its advice was acceptable. The regents were Erastian by instinct, and for most of them this outweighed their Reformed loyalties; as private individuals they may have accepted the authority of ministers and elders, but in their official capacity they tried to keep the Church out of politics. They were also inclined towards religious toleration as a practical necessity rather than as a principle; religious unity would perhaps have been preferable to pluralism, but the price of enforcing it would have been too high even if it had been a practical possibility. In the early years of the new state the regents were faced with a situation where only a very small minority of the population were even committed Protestants, let alone open supporters of the Reformed Church, and the great majority were probably more Catholic than anything else. At the same time they were fighting a war for survival, and in order to hold out against

the Spanish they needed as broad a base of support as possible. In such a situation there could be no question of religious coercion, that is, trying to force people to join the Reformed Church. In addition, the population as a whole had a lively memory of the period of intense religious persecution during the governorship of the Duke of Alba, and there were few who wanted to return to that particular nightmare. Subsequently the rise in membership of the Reformed Church was painfully slow. The war continued until 1648, by which time not only had the Protestant dissenters established themselves as a normal part of Dutch life – however much regretted by some – but the work of the Holland Mission had consolidated the position of the Catholics.

However, this does not completely explain the attitude of the political authorities in the Republic. Elsewhere in Europe governments proved ready, and indeed eager, to take violent and even risky action in the attempt to enforce religious unity – there was, after all, only one truth and it was the state's duty to support the True Church and drive out blasphemy. It would seem that the priorities of the Dutch regents were different. This was particularly true for the regents of Holland: here the towns grew rapidly, in terms of both wealth and population, during the first half of the century, levels of immigration were high, and the religious situation was uncertain and volatile. Around 1620 the limited evidence available suggests that about half of the population was religiously uncommitted: at least their adherence to any particular church or sect cannot be traced.<sup>1</sup> In these circumstances the reactions of the regents in Holland were unambivalent: they chose to give priority to maintaining internal peace and to the needs of the economy. If this was a significant step towards a secular state, it was not a conscious one but rather a pragmatic response to a situation that was far from ideal. An important factor was that the power of the regents was distinctly limited, in practical terms in any case: the only forces at their disposal were the urban militias, recruited from the middle ranks of society, which were unlikely to enforce repressive policies with any enthusiasm, if at all. Of course, in a crisis it was possible to call in military help from the provincial authorities, but this was a very clumsy weapon and could not be used on a regular basis without endangering that local autonomy which was at the very core of the regents' political values. Just

as important was the evident lack of friction between the various religious groups; in practice the co-existence of different churches and sects proved not to be a threat to public order and social stability. The violence that broke out during the conflict between Remonstrants and Contra-remonstrants during the Twelve Years Truce can be regarded as the exception which proves the rule. Firstly, this was a conflict within the Reformed Church, and not one between the followers of different churches. Furthermore, the violence was usually the result of Remonstrant regents trying to impose their will on Contra-remonstrants or vice versa, and generally failing. As long as the Catholics kept their heads down and Protestant dissenters proved themselves to be useful citizens, then the regents preferred to let sleeping dogs lie and concentrate on their secular ends despite the dubious moral position this choice put them in.

The fact of a pluralist society presented conventional theology with a difficult problem. Pleas for toleration had emerged during the course of the religious conflicts of the sixteenth century, but they had – with very few exceptions – been conditional and temporary. Toleration was at best seen as a necessary accomodation to a temporarily intractable problem, pending the reassertion of religious unity when the opportunity arose. However, it must soon have become clear to most observers in the Republic that, while the balance between the various religious groupings might change, pluralism was there to stay. In the face of this unpalatable truth, the reaction of the Reformed Church was to retreat into a more strictly defined doctrinal orthodoxy at the expense of a major split within the church. During the years of struggle under the cross and in the early years of the Revolt, the Reformed movement had displayed a considerable degree of theological flexibility, but as soon as the Church gained power it faced a set of problems that were perhaps as much ecclesiological as doctrinal. Facing a complex and confused religious situation, the Church had the choice between comprehension, i.e. flexible policies on doctrine and discipline to embrace as much of the population as possible, or a strict definition of the true church. It chose the latter, first against the so-called Libertines in Utrecht<sup>2</sup> and elsewhere, and then against the Remonstrants, and this orthodox stance received the imprimatur of the other Reformed churches at the synod of Dordt. Such an approach meant that the Reformed Church was never going to be able

to embrace the whole nation. Its membership increased considerably in the course of the seventeenth century until it included a majority of the population, but its unbending approach erected impassable barriers to other Protestant groups and even created a new rival church, the Remonstrants.<sup>3</sup>

The living symbol of this triumphant orthodoxy after Dordt was Voetius (Gijsbert Voet), minister in Utrecht and then professor of theology at its newly founded university in 1636. He fought an unending battle in defence of his particular version of Calvinist orthodoxy, and against everything he perceived as a threat to the doctrine agreed at Dordt. A core element of this theological system was a particularly harsh version of predestination: although all people are sinners and thus deserve the punishments of Hell, God has decided by an eternal decree that some would be saved, not because they possessed any special merit but through the gift of grace. The Reformed Church was dominated by Voetius and his followers until the second half of the century, when a distinctly more liberal movement began to gain momentum under the influence of Johannes Cocceius, professor of theology at Leiden from 1650. The Voetian insistence on strict observance of the Sabbath was one of the first targets of the Cocceians, and was symbolic of a broader aim to mitigate some of the harsher implications of orthodox theology in the hope of giving the Church a more universal appeal. By the beginning of the next century this softer version of Calvinism was beginning to dominate the Dutch Reformed Church.

The victory at Dordt, however, did not mean that the now purified Church was able to impose its values on Dutch society. Once the dangers of schism had been averted and the Remonstrants reconciled to their expulsion, the regents throughout the Republic reasserted their usual secular priorities, and the momentum for a more godly society began to turn inwards. From this point onwards the movement for a further reformation (*nadere reformatie*) concentrated on the cultivation of personal piety along the same lines as contemporary English Puritanism and later German Pietism. A sub-culture of pious homilies, moral tracts – many of them translations of English Puritan writings – and religious verse developed to encourage a strict personal and household piety. In contrast, as the Reformed Church slowly began to include a greater proportion of the Dutch population,



its enforcement of congregational discipline became – inevitably perhaps – decidedly less strict.<sup>4</sup> In a way this was a double defeat for those who strove for a godly society: true godliness was to be found in the household, not in society at large, and not even in congregations which now included too many of the lukewarm and backsliders. The privatization of piety replaced the godly society.

Although the theological disputes between the Remonstrant and the Contra-remonstrants had focused on the issue of predestination, perhaps the most important issues concerned the nature of the church. The Remonstrants aimed at a more inclusive church embracing a broader range of doctrinal opinions, and this approach was attractive to regents faced with governing a religiously divided population. There was also a significant pastoral problem, as it was feared that the doctrine of predestination in its strict form could induce despair or, even worse, lead to the temptations of antinomianism. How could ministers encourage people to live a more godly life if the fact was that they were either doomed to hell or to salvation and nothing they did could make any difference? In response to this problem, the Remonstrants suggested that a degree of co-operation in the reception of the grace offered by God was possible. Also, whereas the orthodox position seemed to imply that only a tiny remnant of humankind would be saved, the Remonstrants seemed to be moving towards the concept of universal salvation, so that only those who refused the gift of grace were doomed to damnation. The Remonstrant defeat at Dordt ended the possibility of the creation of a broad church for the population as a whole, and forced them into accepting their expulsion and setting up their own church. The membership of the new church was and remained small but it included a number of leading theologians and, in response to their defeat, they began to develop a theory of toleration.

What was different about the theories developed by these theologians was that there was now no prospect of the Remonstrants ever coming to power, and so they had to concentrate on defending the right of religious minorities to at least a degree of toleration. As such they were able to link up with a powerful Netherlands tradition of an aversion to using violence to resolve religious problems which was as much emotional as intellectual. This can be traced back at least to Erasmus in the early sixteenth century, who argued that only a very

few core beliefs were essential for salvation, and that the rest should be regarded as *adiaphora*, or things indifferent. Later in the same century Dirck Volckertsz. Coornhert was a more explicit champion of a broad measure of religious toleration. Most opponents of religious persecution, however, still believed that those who erred should be brought to see the truth, but that violence was not the way to achieve that end. In the seventeenth century, in response to the Remonstrant dilemma, Grotius strove for an ecumenism which would bring together both the leading Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic communion. More realistically, leading Remonstrants such as Espiscopius and later Jean Le Clerc argued for a degree of toleration for differing beliefs rather than full comprehension or a truly ecumenical solution. Although such thinkers had moved past identifying Rome with the Antichrist – indeed, Grotius had played a leading part in undermining the scriptural case for this – they were not ready to grant Catholics as much freedom as dissenting Protestants. Partly this was for political reasons, as Catholics were believed to owe obedience to a foreign power – the papacy – but also because while Catholic doctrine was perhaps not so deplorable, the Church itself was regarded as an oppressive organization. Catholics could be treated leniently, but the Catholic Church as a powerful and intolerant institution could not safely be tolerated.

The separate Remonstrant Church remained small in terms of numbers, though it boxed above its weight as it attracted a highly educated and politically influential membership. Dutch pluralism was given its particular character by the confusing variety of radical sects which flourished to a greater or lesser degree during the Golden Age. Numerically the most important were the various Baptist groups, no longer the socially and politically dangerous radicals of the early years of the Reformation period, but pacifist and industrious Mennonites who were perpetually weakened by their tendency to split into ever smaller groups, each believing they were the only true church. Whereas the established Protestant churches believed only God knew who the saved were, each of the Baptist sects believed themselves to be the invisible church of the saints. The Mennonites modified their original beliefs enough to survive in civil society: they would not swear oaths but would affirm, they stuck to their pacifism but paid their taxes, and remarkably the Dutch authorities accepted them as useful

citizens. Less acceptable to mainstream opinion were the Socinians and later Cartesian rationalists and Spinozists, loose groupings of intellectuals who were regarded as virtual atheists because of their scepticism with regard to the Trinity and other shibboleths of orthodoxy. Such thinkers had to exercise a certain degree of circumspection in the expression of their views as they ran the risk of running foul of the laws against blasphemy, as was the case with Adriaan Koerbagh, who was sentenced to ten years imprisonment by the Amsterdam magistrates. Spinoza was careful what he published about his religious views, with reason, as his posthumous complete works were banned and publicly burned. Nevertheless such radical thinkers were free to discuss their views in private and, however small their numbers, they contributed much to the intellectual ferment of the second half of the century. Cartesian rationalism infiltrated the universities and influenced public debate on religious issues. One of the reasons for the impassioned opposition to Balthasar Bekker's publications against witchcraft prosecutions was his supposed Cartesianism and the threat this sort of reasoning was felt to pose more generally to basic Christian doctrines.

In many ways the most radical challenge to conventional religion came from the Collegiants, a movement based on a common approach to the truth rather than shared doctrines. It also had no fixed membership and was thus in fundamental ways the antithesis of a church as normally understood. The various colleges held meeting to discuss religious issues in the very broadest sense, and were attended by men from the whole spectrum of Protestant groups. Only Catholics, it seems, were excluded – or excluded themselves. The movements had its origins among Remonstrants in Rijnsburg near Leiden during the difficult years immediately after Dordt, and picked up momentum in the second half of the century. Again the numbers involved were not high, but the intellectual quality in general was, and the colleges formed a link between radical thinkers and the socially and politically more influential levels of Dutch society. The nature of the colleges varied from town to town and possibly from meeting to meeting, but the common ground seems to have been that everyone was free to speak without fear of censure or expulsion – indeed, as there was no membership, there could be no excommunication. The movement as a whole directly and indirectly contributed much to the intellectual

ferment of the third quarter of the century, but subsequently faded into sectarian obscurity.<sup>5</sup>

The sheer variety and number of sects and individual charismatic leaders bewildered and sometimes appalled outside observers, and their profusion in Amsterdam in particular was noted by foreign travellers as something approaching a tourist attraction. These groups covered a wide spectrum of beliefs, ranging from spiritualists in the familist tradition to those with more immediate millenarian expectations. An upsurge of chiliastic movements throughout Europe is one of the less easily explained phenomena of the third quarter of the seventeenth century, ranging from the Fifth Monarchists in England during the civil wars and Interregnum to the brief but tumultuous career of Sabbatai Sevi as a messianic leader among the Sephardic Jews of the Mediterranean. The Republic, too, had its share of millenarians, from the versifier and playwright Jan Zoet, who apparently believed he would never die – at least before the Second Coming – to the supreme egotist Antoinette Bourignon, who believed herself to be the sole mouthpiece of God. The numbers involved were small but they garnered a lot of publicity and ensured that such ideas entered the late seventeenth-century mix.

Jews too contributed to the religious pluralism of the Golden Age. From the late sixteenth century onwards Sephardic Jews from Spain and Portugal had come to the Republic, and were joined by an influx of Ashkenazim from Central and Eastern Europe in the aftermath of a wave of pogroms round the middle years of the seventeenth century. Their biggest impact was in Amsterdam, and here they enjoyed freedom of worship in practice if not in law.<sup>6</sup> The Sephardim were largely from families of *conversos* (that is, Jews who had been forced to convert to Christianity in the sixteenth century) and many of them felt the need to rediscover their Jewish identity. The resultant upsurge of rabbinical learning not only helped to consolidate the Jewish community but had a narrow but definite impact on Dutch culture as a whole, firstly through the impact of the biblical scholarship of teachers such as Manasseh ben Israel, and then through the subversive use of such learning by Spinoza. The contribution of the Ashkenazim to Dutch culture was rather different as they had managed to maintain an unbroken tradition of beliefs and law, and were more concerned to cling to what held them together rather than taking the risk of innovation.

In contrast, the Catholics were the most numerous of the religious outsiders in the Republic. Although the greatest concentration was in North Brabant, where they constituted over 90 per cent of the population, there were also substantial minorities in the towns and countryside of Holland. The organization of the Catholic Church had been shattered by the Revolt and the Holland Mission had to rebuild almost from scratch. The number of communicants steadily increased until about the middle of the century after which numbers stabilized. There were two types of Catholic experience during the Republic: in the Generality Lands and in North Brabant in particular, a Catholic population was governed by a tiny Protestant elite but could find spiritual and pastoral support from neighbouring Catholic regions; in the rest of the Republic they had to learn to live as best they could amid a Protestant majority under the pastoral guidance of mission priests. In the latter region the Catholic experience was distinctive: it was a missionary territory staffed by a combination of regular and secular clergy, its services had to be held in secret in improvised churches, and lay influence was much greater than the Church allowed elsewhere – except perhaps in England, where the Catholic community was smaller and even more embattled.<sup>7</sup> A singular contribution came from the so-called *kloppjes*. These were semi-religious women, living as individuals or in groups, who provided the priests and the stations of the Holland Mission with substantial financial support as well as a myriad of practical services. They did not fit well with the intense clericalism of the Counter-Reformation but in the main the Church had – reluctantly – to deal with them as they made themselves indispensable to the smooth running of the Mission. Despite being to some extent second-class citizens because of their religion, Dutch Catholics – outside the Generality Lands at least – appear to have been more or less completely integrated into the cultural life of the Republic. Notoriously, Vondel converted to Catholicism and yet continued to be the acknowledged literary master of his age. Vermeer may have converted or not, his mature work gives no clue – and perhaps that is the point. Like other religious groups, Catholics may have become increasingly endogamous later in the century, and as the economy faltered they certainly relied more and more on their own poor-relief systems. However, this is far from the later phenomenon of

pillarization (*verzuiling*) where society was separated into vertical divisions – pillars – composed of distinct ideological/religious groupings (in the Dutch case Protestant, Catholic, socialist and liberal/neutral) whose members remained within their own community more or less from birth to grave, with separate churches, schools, universities and later trade unions and even radio and television stations.<sup>8</sup> Catholics were disadvantaged in the exercise of their religion, were excluded from political office and barred from many official posts, but they had full civil rights and they had the same education in both content and form as everyone else. There were the beginnings of a separate Catholic historiography of the Revolt, and Catholics cultivated a very different form of piety to that of most Protestants, but this was not yet a distinct sub-culture.

The Revolt disrupted the organization of the Catholic Church but the new rulers did not replace it with a top-down reformation as in most other protestant countries. The Reformed Church was given a privileged position but membership was not compulsory and for many decades it included only a rather small minority of the population of the new state. Many attended the services at their local church without joining the new Church; many remained more or less Catholic; others were or became members of a Mennonite group; while yet others were uncertain or indifferent. It was these peculiar circumstances which gave birth to Dutch religious pluralism, but the question still remains as to why it persisted, and also as to why it seems in practice to have caused so little social friction. In the course of the seventeenth century the Reformed Church increased its membership but it never achieved a monopoly, a substantial minority stayed with or returned to the Catholic fold, and a variety of Protestant groups maintained a modest presence alongside the two major religious groupings. The civil authorities were not inclined to force people into conformity with the Reformed Church, and the latter seems to have been somewhat reluctant, at least at first, to water down the commitment of its membership by admitting large numbers of people who would be lukewarm at best. Admittedly regents outside Holland seem to have been prepared to put more pressure on non-conformists, but everywhere local authorities enjoyed a great degree of autonomy and so even here the experience of dissenters could vary considerably from place to place.

Although all sides agreed that there was only one truth and all believed that they were in possession of that truth, this theoretical incompatibility does not seem to have prevented the persistence of a sort of workaday ecumenism. There were no anti-Catholic riots in Holland, though after the Treaty of Münster in 1648 some Catholics – who seem to have assumed that peace meant complete freedom of worship – reacted violently to attempts to break up their services. Violence also accompanied the struggle between Remonstrants and Contra-remonstrants during the Truce, but that was a conflict within the Reformed Church and was inextricably involved with political motives and fears. Peaceful co-existence in practice and intransigent hostility in theory seems inherently unstable, and it has been argued that toleration did not imply acceptance and so could easily shift to its opposite.<sup>9</sup> However, there was no such instability in the Dutch situation, and tolerance survived considerable political stresses both internal and from foreign threats. On the contrary, the experience of the Dutch Republic demonstrated to a sceptical Europe that religious pluralism did not necessarily lead to political instability, and indeed that it could be considerably less disruptive of civil peace than attempts to enforce religious uniformity. However, this was still a far cry from accepting that religious toleration was a virtue in itself rather than a necessary evil. Until it was generally accepted that there was more than one road to heaven, toleration would continue to imply the acceptance of evil within society. For the Dutch in the seventeenth century, the concept of *adiaphora* allowed Grotius to embrace a wide-ranging ecumenism, and later in the century the profound scepticism of Bayle undermined all claims to an exclusive possession of the truth. The demonstration of over a hundred years of religious pluralism without obvious divine retribution or political collapse was in the end perhaps the most powerful argument.

In the early modern period conventional philosophy was trapped between the demands of theology and the challenge set by the scientific discoveries of the time. By the end of the seventeenth century it was already collapsing under the weight of its own inadequacies, though conservative theologians and academic philosophers still clung to it as a metaphysical security-blanket. A fundamental problem was that Aristotelian philosophy, in the magisterial Christian interpretation of Thomas Aquinas, provided the theoretical basis of

conventional philosophy and it was not easy to discard it without undermining the explanations of central Christian doctrines. Only the scholastic distinction between substance and essence, for example, could make sense of the doctrine of transubstantiation (the belief that the bread and wine in the communion service became the actual body and blood of Christ), let alone the Trinity. There is a parallel here with the way in which philosophy was inextricably linked with the categories of conventional natural philosophy, though in the one case philosophy was driven by the needs of theology while in the other natural philosophy was constrained by the Aristotelian world-view. Perhaps the best evidence for the fundamental inadequacies of the established philosophical systems is the alacrity with which both theologians and scientists grasped at the lifeline that seemed to be offered by the ideas of the French philosopher Descartes.

Descartes is strongly linked to the Dutch Republic, partly because he wrote and published his major work there, and partly because of the enthusiasm with which his ideas were met in Dutch intellectual circles. The essence of Descartes' method was to sweep away the confusion of centuries of scholastic debate and accept only that which was indisputably the case as the starting point for his philosophy; from this sound basis he argued that the use of reason would inevitably lead to the discovery of the true nature of existence. In the Republic the Cartesian method was used both to undermine conventional theology and to provide a theoretical basis for the new science, though unfortunately Descartes' thinking proved to have fatal flaws as far as the latter was concerned. The Cartesian method was perceived as dangerous more for what it might lead to than because of any particularly radical conclusions reached by its exponents; no one could tell where, starting from scratch, unfettered reason might lead. In some ways it might be said that Spinoza proved how right they were. In a series of works, the most radical of which had to remain unpublished during his lifetime, Spinoza made an almost complete break with conventional philosophy with radical implications for political theory, ethics and especially theology. He employed the resources of rabbinical learning together with the recent advances in biblical hermeneutics to dismiss existing ideas about the relationship of humanity to God. The core of his conclusions were implied by his use of the terms God and Nature as synonyms, which



to contemporaries sounded like atheism, and they were probably right as Spinoza would have argued that this was the only way in which the term God could be given any meaningful content. His was a purist form of philosophy, written in austere Latin and attempting to demonstrate the truth of his conclusions with mathematical precision, especially in his posthumous *Ethics*. Nevertheless, he gained a certain notoriety during his lifetime, and the ambitious young philosopher Leibniz made tentative contact during a visit to the Republic.<sup>10</sup> More surprisingly, Spinoza was offered a chair at Heidelberg but turned it down, probably wisely.

Although he represented the most profound of challenges to existing ways of thought, Spinoza was only one of a range of writers who laid the foundations for a transformation in the way the world was understood in the late seventeenth century. Throughout Europe this was a time of fundamental reassessment of basic issues in philosophy and theology as well as science,<sup>11</sup> and Dutch writers played a leading part in this attempt to transform European thought. Alongside the followers of Spinoza, there were the academically respectable but deeply pessimistic historical pyrrhonists such as Jacobus Perizonius, who were the post-modernist of their time with their corrosive scepticism regarding true knowledge of the past. Above all was the work of the systematic sceptic Pierre Bayle, ranging from his early work attacking the idea that comets were signs of coming disaster to his immensely influential *Dictionnaire historique et critique*. As a brilliant publicist, this French exile was able to use his Dutch refuge and the resources of the Dutch publishing industry to become a major precursor of the Enlightenment.

It is perhaps significant that two of the most effective challenges to the philosophical and theological establishment came from thinkers who were to an extent outsiders in Dutch society. Spinoza was born in Amsterdam and brought up to be an intellectual leader of the Sephardic community. However his unconventional thinking caused him to be formally cursed and expelled from the Jewish community, and he subsequently found support in radical Christian circles, though for obvious reasons he never converted. Bayle was a refugee from the persecution of Protestants in the France of Louis XIV, but his unconventional views did not endear him to the more mainline Huguenot exiles in the Republic. Both, however, found an

atmosphere in the Republic in the late seventeenth century which was significantly receptive to their ideas despite opposition from the religious and academic establishment and, in the case of Spinoza, bans from the civil authorities.

## 9

## The Culture of Politics

At the beginning of the seventeenth century a major problem for the Dutch was how to justify the Revolt before the rest of Europe – and indeed to themselves. The Republic had established its existence as a new state by the military successes of the 1590s, but securing international recognition that it had successfully thrown off Spanish rule was another matter. The new state gained a measure of such recognition at the treaty of Antwerp with Spain in 1609, which brought in the Twelve Years Truce, but full acceptance of the Republic as an independent state by the whole of Europe had to wait until the Treaty of Münster in 1648. Moreover, it was not just a matter of persuading the other states of Europe that the new regime was legitimate: no government at this time could feel secure if it had come to power simply through the successful use of force, as this could and would be seen as an extremely dangerous precedent. So the Dutch needed to prove, both to themselves and to others, that the Revolt had been right as well as successful. The answer that was found for this seemingly impossible task was, in essence, to claim that the Revolt had never taken place: there had been no rising against legitimate authority but rather an armed defence of the privileges – the political rights of estates, nobles and towns which together formed the ancient constitution of the Netherlands – against a Spanish regime that had sought to subvert them. A parallel argument had been used by the Huguenots in the French wars of religion in the late sixteenth century, notably by François Hotman in his *Franco-Gallia*, and was later to be deployed by parliamentarians in the early phases of the English Civil War. The core common element in such arguments was the idea that the proper form of a polity was how it had been at the time of its foundation, and that any deviation from this pristine state was necessarily a deformation,

and therefore illegitimate. Hotman, for example, looked to the constitution of the kingdom founded by the Franks after their conquest of Roman Gaul as the only legitimate form for the French state. In their turn the Dutch rebels traced Dutch freedom and the supremacy of the estates of the various provinces of the Netherlands back to the polity founded by the Batavians in the Low Countries during the later Roman Empire.<sup>1</sup> The advantage in both cases was that the evidence was extremely sparse, and so easily manipulated to suit contemporary needs. In this way history was brought in first to justify political action and then to legitimate the result.

The early years of the Revolt saw a flood of pamphlets justifying resistance to Spain, deploying a wide range of arguments, but a common theme was defence of the 'privileges'. Philip II or – in the more conciliatory analyses of the situation – his evil advisers were trying to sweep away the privileges and force an absolutist system on the people of the Netherlands. So it was argued that those opposing Spanish rule were not rebels but were trying to defend the legitimate system of government for the region; it was the Spanish who were attempting to overthrow the ancient constitution and so were the real enemies of order.<sup>2</sup> The idea of Batavian freedom had been cultivated earlier in the sixteenth century, inspired by the rediscovery of the Roman historian Tacitus' *Germania*, which contrasted German freedom with Roman corruption as well as providing what little was known at this time about the Batavians. It was now claimed that Batavian freedom had persisted throughout the Middle Ages, and that the states of the various provinces had only ever conceded conditional powers to the various princes who had ruled in the Low Countries. This entirely ahistorical vision became the standard justification of the Revolt and the subsequent war with Spain. It was particularly useful as it helped to sidetrack two alternative justifications which emerged during the Revolt but which were much less palatable to the rulers of the new state. The idea of something very like popular sovereignty struggled to emerge, but in the end it was only acceptable in the form of the regents being regarded as the representatives of the people and their champions against Spanish tyranny, and certainly not as empowering the people against the regents. An interpretation of the Revolt that was almost as objectionable to the political elite was the assertion that it was fought for

religious reasons, and that defence of the true church was sufficient justification for opposition to a legitimate government. Despite, or even because of, the important part played by supporters of the Reformed Church, neither during the Revolt nor later were the regents willing to allow that religious persecution could be an acceptable reason for armed resistance to legitimate government. Insistence on a purely political justification for the Revolt served to suppress this dangerous idea. Indeed, Oldenbarnevelt among others maintained, on the contrary, that religious extremists had endangered the Revolt: he claimed that it was the excesses of the Calvinist radicals in the towns of Flanders and Brabant which had lost the southern provinces of the Netherlands to Spain. This conviction was one of the reasons for Oldenbarnevelt's intransigence towards the Contra-remonstrants, whom he saw as a potentially divisive force in the young Dutch state.

By the beginning of the seventeenth century the idea that the Revolt had not been a revolution but on the contrary had restored the proper political system of the Netherlands – if only in the northern provinces – had become the quasi-official founding myth of the new state. This interpretation was summed up in *De antiquitate reipublicae Batavae* by the young humanist and jurist Grotius in 1610, published first in Latin with the aim of justifying the existence of the Dutch Republic before a European audience. Satisfactory as this position was in the short term, it put the political system of the Republic in a strait-jacket: if the right way of governing the state was defined by what had always been the case since Batavian times, then no reform of the system was possible, whatever the weaknesses that might be revealed. Some wiggle room could be found by the ingenious manipulation of historical precedent, but the possibilities were distinctly limited. The result was that much of the political debate throughout the history of the Republic turned on rival interpretations of history, which encouraged the study of the past but very much with the present in mind. Some of the central problems of Dutch political life, notably the powers of the stadhouder and the location of sovereignty (in the States General or the provincial states) could not be solved by this means, as precedents were by no means unambiguous, and in any case were becoming increasingly anachronistic as the century progressed. Constitutional problems could not be resolved by considerations of efficiency,

let alone in terms of the ideal state; the ideal form of government for the Republic could only be found at the origins of the Dutch polity and any changes had to be disguised as returns to this pristine state.

The first major crisis in the history of the Dutch Republic focused, in part at least, on a constitutional problem: the relationship between church and state. The Reformed Church strove for independence of political control, but the civil authorities provided it with churches in which it could hold its services, paid the salaries of its ministers, and so expected a considerable say in its affairs. The semi-official position of the Church meant that it could not be left to its own devices, but differences of opinion concerning the extent and nature of this necessary political supervision could only intensify the political disputes arising out of the conflict between Remonstrants and Contra-remonstrants. At one level it exacerbated the disagreements about the location of sovereignty. At the heart of the problem was the fact that the Remonstrant movement was much stronger in Holland than in the rest of the Republic, and its supporters feared that a national synod would inevitably be dominated by Contra-remonstrants – as was indeed to be the case when one finally met in 1619. Oldenbarnevelt insisted that religious matters within a province were not subject to outside interference as this would be a unacceptable infringement of provincial autonomy. The principle of provincial sovereignty – or autonomy (the theory of sovereignty being of rather recent coinage) – was especially important to Holland as it was this principle which prevented the leading province from being outvoted in the States General, and so enabled it to dominate the Republic. Yet this principle led inexorably to a rejection of a national synod which could impose its decisions on the provinces. On the other side, the perceived necessity for a national synod encouraged the conviction that there had to be at least a minimum of sovereign powers at the centre of the Republic, whether these lay with the States General, the stadhouders or both. More generally, it became apparent that any division within the Reformed Church had the potential to become a major political problem; in other words, the Church was too important to be left to its own devices. Republicans later in the century did not easily forget that one of their icons had been brought to the scaffold through, as they saw it, ministers of the Reformed Church interfering in politics.

One of Oldenbarnevelt's reasons for opposing the Contra-remonstrants was his conviction that it had been the violent take-over of towns in Flanders and Brabant by Calvinist extremists after the Pacification of Ghent (1576) which had lost the southern Netherlands to the Revolt. In his view Calvinists from the South had played a similar divisive role during the governorship of the earl of Leicester in the Netherlands ten years later. He brought this belief that religious extremists were a threat to the Dutch state to the disputes during the Truce, with ultimately fatal consequences for himself. The *Advocaat's* determination to keep the Reformed Church in check was shared by many regents, at least in Holland. It seems that one of the reasons why the Remonstrants found so much support in Holland was that they were willing to allow the civil power more authority in religious matters than were their opponents. The regents were stubbornly Erastian and there was recurrent friction between them and the Church at all levels. In the towns, regents wanted a bigger say in the appointment of ministers than the Church was willing to allow, and this tricky issue was never satisfactorily resolved though in the final analysis regent control over salaries gave them a vital advantage. After the Synod of Dordt it became clear that even those provinces and regents who had supported the Contra-remonstrants were determined to keep control in their own hands, and the decisions of Dordt were implemented on a province by province basis rather than by any central *fiat*. Although the fall of Oldenbarnevelt had seemed to mark the defeat of the principle of provincial sovereignty, with Holland having to submit to decisions of the States General, as soon as the crisis was over the provinces reverted as one to their usual assertion of autonomy in important matters, including religion. The principle of provincial sovereignty triumphed in practice, if not in theory.

However, the relationship between the Reformed Church and the civil authorities remained problematic. There were no clear or firm rules determining what power town or provincial governments had with regard to the Church, but for most of the time the pragmatism which was such a defining feature of Dutch society meant that serious conflict was avoided. Yet religion continued to colour political attitudes and political thinking. The Republican side was on the whole rather firmer in its resolve to keep the Reformed

Church out of politics, while the Orangists were inclined to be more favourable to its pretensions to a significant voice in public affairs. The legacy of the Truce crisis was long-lasting, with Republicans stressing the dangers of the Church meddling in politics (especially in alliance with a prince of Orange), while on the other hand Orangists saw Maurits as the saviour of the integrity of both church and state. Despite, or because of, the prevailing pluralism of the Republic, religion continued to play a significant role in Dutch attitudes to politics. The political instincts of the regents may have been Erastian, yet they were all – after the synod of Dordt – members of the Reformed Church; the Church was an independent institution, yet the civil authorities claimed the right to exercise some control over its activities. The Church did not aim at theocracy, but expected the state to protect and promote its interests, for example by enforcing laws against Catholic services and suppressing what the Church regarded as blasphemy. In conventional political theory one of the main purposes of the state was the support of the true church of God, and the Reformed Church never tired of reminding the regents of this.

Alongside the practical problems of the establishment and consolidation of the new state, the political theory taught in Dutch universities continued along standard post-Renaissance lines with little or no concession to contemporary political circumstances. The nature of the ideal state was discussed in Aristotelian terms, with the aim of displaying mastery of classical learning on the subject and of striving for universal truths rather than contributing to mundane political debate. The general consensus was entirely conventional: the best form of government was one that mixed the power of monarch, nobles and the people in a balanced way. Such explorations of ideal types seem curiously at odds with the prevailing political attitude which saw the state as a unique historical creation and only secondarily as displaying features of the best constitution, that is, the Republic was governed in the way it was because that was how it had been at its foundation, not because that was the best form of government in any abstract sense – though the Dutch were no doubt willing to argue that it was that as well. There was little room in this conventional political thought for the resistance theories developed in the heat of the religious conflicts of the previous century,



still less for what was seen as the morally as well as politically subversive writings of Machiavelli. What was taught in the universities and elaborated on in academic works was essentially concerned with linking into the classical and Renaissance mainstream of political philosophy; the practical issue of the nature of the new state which had arisen from the Revolt turned out to be the province of different authors in other disciplines.

The law provided what was in many ways a more effective and certainly more direct way of exploring the nature of the state. In fact, it is probably misleading to make a sharp distinction between law and political theory in this period. Law was seen as forming the structure of the early modern state, not in the form of written constitutions but in the sense that it was unchanging law which was understood to determine the distribution of power and authority within a polity. Partly this was through positive law regarded as dating from the foundation of the state – in the Dutch case from the time of the Batavians – and determining its proper constitutional form. In addition, however, there was the influence of the more prescriptive and systematic Roman Law tradition which became increasingly influential throughout Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Unlike positive law, which worked from actual laws and customs and sought to discover the principles thought to underlie such practices, Roman Law worked from basic principles and used these as a guide to the formulation of actual laws. As the main body of classical Roman Law had been collated in the later Roman Empire, it is hardly surprising that its general drift tended to be authoritarian, and that it had a considerable influence on the development of absolutist thinking in the post-Renaissance period. However, probably the most powerful strain of legal thinking in this period, and certainly the most innovative, was natural law theory, which sought to produce a set of legal principles with universal validity, drawing on a number of sources but with particular concern for biblical evidence because, of course, the law of nature was also necessarily the law of God.

Legal modes of thought were also at the heart of the standard Dutch interpretation of their own history and system of government. In essence the Dutch polity was formed from rights and duties embodied in law through historical precedent. This was not always helpful: the relationship of the States of Holland, say, to the States

General could not in principle be governed by decisions of either body, still less by expediency, but by precedents informed by an unfortunately anachronistic understanding of the historical context which had produced those precedents. In contrast to the academic political theorists, most discussions of the nature of contemporary states came from legally trained authors. This was certainly the case in the Dutch Republic, and the outstanding contribution to political theory in the first half of the century came from the great humanist Hugo de Groot (Grotius), wearing his legal hat. Grotius was a precociously gifted student of the classics, but turned to the law, and through the law to politics, to build up a career. He became a close associate of Oldenbarnevelt and used his considerable forensic and rhetorical skills to provide legal justifications for the latter's policies, and in particular to support the autonomy of Holland in religious matters. At this early stage in his career, his writings were unashamedly partisan, and his major contribution to political theory came only after he had been brought down by the fall of Oldenbarnevelt. His *De jure belli ac pacis* (1625) is often hailed as the founding work of international law, but its originality in this respect seems somewhat exaggerated, as natural law theory in general aimed at a supra-national validity. For contemporaries, the appeal of this book lay perhaps not in any particular originality but rather in being an erudite introduction to, together with an acute commentary on, the major issues of political theory in the natural law tradition. On the other hand, while it certainly displayed immense learning and owed a considerable debt to the Spanish natural law thinkers of the late sixteenth century, it would be misleading to dismiss it as a mere summary of existing theory. One example of his unique contribution is his assertion that the laws of nature would be valid even if God did not exist (or if he took no interest in human affairs), and Grotius was prepared to go much further in support of freedom of religion than even most proponents of toleration at this time. *De jure belli ac pacis* became required reading for the well-educated with an interest in political thought, but it also broached problems which would concern political theorists for the rest of the century.<sup>3</sup>

The popular belief in the Batavian origins of the Dutch state, and that these inherited institutions were sacrosanct, taken together meant that any adaptation to changed circumstances was in theory

impossible because there was no authority which could legitimize such a change. Similarly, academic political theory seemed to offer little of immediate relevance for the Dutch situation. Even natural law theory such as practised by Grotius and others tended to examine the character of existing polities rather than pointing the way to practical reforms. So the political crises of the first half of the century – the successful coup by Maurits in 1618 and the failed one by Willem II in 1650 – may have produced masses of pamphlets but they were in the main contributions to propaganda along well-worn lines rather than serious contributions to the constitutional problems revealed by these threats to Dutch political stability. In the medium term the reactions to 1618 served only to firm up the divide between Republican and Orangist interpretations of the nature of the Dutch state, but in the second half of the century a radical break with conventional thinking took place in Dutch political thought, led most notably by the brothers Johan and Pieter de la Court and reaching a peak with the political writings of Spinoza. This approach can be seen as reaching back to Machiavelli and then forward again by way of Descartes and possibly Hobbes, and was marked most obviously by the search for a new interpretation of the nature of the state and of the purpose of political philosophy. The aim of the De la Courts, in its narrowest terms, was to justify the politics of the True Freedom – the slogan for Republican dominance in the 1650s and 1660s under the leadership of the *raadpensionaris* Johan de Witt – in particular the decision of the States of Holland not to appoint a stadhouder to replace Willem II after he died towards the end of 1651 leaving only a posthumous son. More generally they put forward a robust defence of republicanism based on reason rather than on precedent. The De la Courts used historical evidence – as indeed did Machiavelli in his *Discourses* – but as examples to make and illustrate their case and not as precedents to be followed blindly. Indeed, their general approach appears to have been deliberately iconoclastic, treating academic political theory along Aristotelian lines with as little respect as they showed the Batavian myth.

The main publications of the De la Court brothers came in the early years of the 1660s, which was in many ways a key decade in the intellectual and cultural history of the Republic. These were the *Polityke weeg-schaal* (Political Scales, 1660), *Politieke discoursen* (Political

Discourses, 1662), and the *Interest van Holland* (1662): the first two were edited and published by Pieter after his brother's death in 1660, and the last was by Pieter alone, though it is impossible to determine their respective contributions with any confidence. Johan was possibly rather more of a philosopher and Pieter more of a polemicist, but together they brought a new tone to the contemporary discourse concerning the proper form of the Dutch state and on the nature of politics in general. They provided a combination of hard-headed realism spiced with gratuitous cynicism in support of a republican political agenda, and have been seen as representing the political stance of the regents of Holland during the supremacy of the True Freedom under Johan De Witt. This is probably misleading as few regents would have endorsed the more extreme propositions in these books, and most of them were more interested in the exercise of power at local and provincial level than in a daring thesis justifying their authority. Most were probably more comfortable with the older historical justification of their authority, and were certainly more pragmatists than political philosophers. Nevertheless, at the very least the De la Court brothers provided the shock-troops for the attack on Orangism which erupted in this decade.

The son of Willem II survived the dangerous first few years of life and as the 1660s advanced the question about his role in the future became more and more pressing. By the middle of the century the role of the princes of Orange as stadhouder of a majority of the provinces and captain-general of the army had come to seem an integral and essential part of the system of government. However, after the attempted coup and then death of Willem II, Holland had declined to appoint a successor as stadhouder of the province, and this example had been followed by most of the other provinces. The outcome was a republican regime dominated by Holland under the leadership of the *raadpensionaris* Johan de Witt. However, the young prince's approaching maturity sparked off a pamphlet war over the place of the princes of Orange in the Dutch state and the role of the office of stadhouder in particular. This controversy brought to the surface radically different interpretations of the form that the Dutch state ought to take. On the one side, the Republicans focused on provincial sovereignty and the rule of the regents as the determining characteristics of the Republic, and used the example of Maurits'

seizure of power in 1618 and Willem II's attempt to emulate him in 1650 to argue that the princes of Orange constituted a threat to the political values the Revolt had been fought to safeguard. In this view of Dutch history Oldenbarnevelt was represented as a martyr for the cause of Dutch freedom. The other side argued just as vehemently and with equal conviction that the princes of Orange brought a necessary cohesion to a state that was otherwise inclined to fall into division and indecision. In this interpretation of the recent past Maurits' intervention in 1618 had saved the Republic from disintegrating into civil war, and it was his military successes, together with those of his half-brother Frederik Hendrik, which had won the Dutch their independence from Spain. The tone on both sides of the dispute was tendentious, and both abused history mercilessly in support of their arguments. The strongest argument on the Orangist side was the pragmatic point that the princes of Orange provided central leadership that no other individual or institution could offer, but more important for most Orangists was probably the consideration that the princes had been an integral part of the new state from its inception, and that any change was a dangerous and illegitimate innovation. The Republicans had perhaps the better arguments, but in the end this controversy was not about reason but about perception and political instinct. The Republicans had a mountain to climb in trying to deny that the princes of Orange were a natural part of the Dutch state. It is worth noting that Sir William Temple, former English ambassador to the Republic, in his *Observations on the United Provinces of the Netherlands* (1673) wrote as if the princes, as stadhouder and captain-general, were a necessary part of the Dutch government, despite the fact that his direct experience of the Dutch Republic (1667–70) was gained during the ascendancy of the True Freedom. Of course, Orangism was beginning to be a political force again during Temple's time in The Hague, and the young prince was, after all, the nephew of his king. (Also Willem III had probably come to power before Temple finished writing and so there may well be a certain degree of hindsight in his treatment of the issue.) If the Republicans won the argument, the Orangists' appeal proved to be more potent.

At the very end of the decade Spinoza made his distinctive contribution to the theoretical debate with his *A Theological-Political Treatise* (1670). Although contemporaries tried to link his work to leading

Republican writers, and even to De Witt himself, Spinoza's work had distinctly different aims and was clearly a philosophical treatise rather than a piece of propaganda. His unfinished *Political Treatise*, only published after his death, suggests that his thought was moving in an even more radical direction in his last years, and he may even have been intending to endorse some form of democracy. As the title indicates, the earlier book was particularly concerned with the role of religion in the state, and not entirely surprisingly, Spinoza argues not just that toleration is compatible with political stability, but that 'without such freedom, piety cannot flourish nor the public peace be secure'.<sup>4</sup> If there is an unmistakable idealistic element here, the preference for democracy seems on the contrary based on a fundamentally cynical view of human motivations. Spinoza's criticism of aristocracy seems based on the conviction that the presumed 'best' are no more able to rise above their blind passions than the mass of the people. The influence of the De la Courts and perhaps Hobbes seems evident, but in the *Treatise* the point is pursued with characteristic rigour and willingness to follow the argument through to its logical conclusion. Inevitably his treatment of religion led to accusations of atheism – which he denied indignantly – but it must be admitted that his definition of God came dangerously close to atheism, at least as far as contemporary thinking was concerned. Whether this was hypocrisy or justifiable caution on Spinoza's part is an open question: while he must have been aware that his concept of God was unacceptable – indeed practically incomprehensible – to most of his contemporaries, it does not follow that his denial of atheism was insincere. His equation of God with Nature was perhaps not the equivocation many have believed it to be, but rather a precise metaphysical statement.

This decade of innovative thinking seems to have had very little impact outside rather restricted intellectual circles, or at least this is the impression given by the flood of pamphlets in the crisis year of 1672. The French invasion of that year led to a political upheaval in the towns of Holland and Zeeland, the elevation of Willem III to stadhouder and captain-general, and a purge of the town governments in these provinces. The end of the reign of the True Freedom was bloodily marked by the assassination of Johan de Witt and his brother by a mob in The Hague. The enormous mass of pamphlets which accompanied these events provide rare evidence of popular understanding

of, and participation in, the politics of the Republic.<sup>5</sup> However, on this evidence it would seem that this popular political culture was atavistic rather than progressive, looking to a restoration of a real or mythical past rather than moving towards a new politics. Most obviously this shows in the way that dissatisfaction with the regime of the True Freedom took the form of turning to the prince of Orange as the only possible alternative leadership for the Republic. There was a widespread suspicion, if not belief, that the regents had in some way betrayed the Republic to the French, and this paranoid reaction to the French military successes was balanced by an equally unrealistic conviction that the elevation of Willem III in itself would be enough to save the day. The other major strand of opinion was the common belief that in the past citizens had enjoyed a measure of participation in government, but that these rights had been usurped by the regents. It is true that in some towns citizens had exercised a – very limited – say in the appointment of magistrates, but in most this had never been the case and the dominant form of government in Holland and Zeeland had been oligarchic from the start. The disaffection of the urban militias played a major role in undermining the town governments, so it was hardly surprising that they came to be seen as in a sense the representatives of the citizens, and one of the themes in the pamphlet literature of this year was that they should act as sort of check on the regent regime. Overall, paranoid suspicions and hatreds were more characteristic of the pamphlet literature of this year than any positive plans for reform, and the elevation of Willem III marked the essentially conservative nature of the public mood. The bloody slaughter of the De Witts – after Johan had survived one assassination attempt and already resigned from office – should be a striking reminder of the primitive reactions at the heart of the opposition movement.

In the end nothing changed, except the personnel of government: a rather modest number of Republicans were replaced by Orangists – or opportunistic Orangists – in the governments of the towns in Holland and Zeeland, Willem III took over the leadership of the state, in effect with even more power than his grandfather, Frederik Hendrik, and suggested innovations faded from view while the oligarchy survived. The prince of Orange, of course, did the job: the French advance was halted and eventually driven back, but

Willem had no interest in changing a system of government which gave him in practice all, or almost all, the authority he needed. It seems that the upheavals of 1672 failed to renew the political culture of the Dutch state, but rather added a new layer of prejudice to the political divide between Republicans and Orangists. For the one side, Willem III even more so than Maurits was the saviour of the Republic, while from the other perspective Johan de Witt joined Oldenbarnevelt as a martyr to the cause – and as a reminder of the dangers of popular influence in politics. Spinoza's arguments could not outweigh the shock of the summer of 1672.

For the remainder of the century the most interesting contributions to political thought seem to have again come from lawyers, most notably Ulric Huber, but they continued to move along lines laid down earlier in the century and can almost be said to be extended commentaries on Grotius. Huber at least recognized the need to confront the realities and inconsistencies of the Dutch system of government, though his religious conservatism was a sharp contrast to the implicit ecumenism of the republican radicals, not to mention Spinoza. However, this period is perhaps best seen as an early phase of the Enlightenment, with the rational scepticism of Bayle a more pervasive influence than academic law. More generally, political culture continued to be dominated by competing views of Dutch history, with Brandt's history of the Reformation, for example, focusing on a massively documented but intensely partisan account of the Remonstrant/Contra-remonstrant crisis. Despite the importance of the contributions of Grotius, the De la Courts and Spinoza to the history of political thought, Dutch political attitudes and perceptions remained firmly tied into the modes established during the first decades of the seventeenth century, whereby the only valid criterion of constitutional rectitude was faithfulness to the past. This essentially sterile approach continued well into the following century: the restoration of the stadthoudership in 1747 came on a wave of political nostalgia, and the major political controversy of the 1760s interpreted contemporary problems in terms of the career of Johan de Witt. Only with the Patriot movement later in the century did Dutch political culture begin to break the stranglehold of the past.



## IO

# The Influence of the Dutch Golden Age

Looking at Europe between the Renaissance and the French Revolution from a Dutch perspective brings certain aspects of the social and cultural history of the time into greater prominence. Such an approach is even more subversive of conventional interpretations in the case of the seventeenth century. As far as political history is concerned, the triumph of princely or monarchical absolutism appears less ubiquitous and also less assured, while the virtual autonomy of local power-holders seems considerably more resilient than has often been thought. Similarly, the economic dominance of the Dutch Republic is a forceful reminder that a conventional map of Europe is almost invariably a poor indicator of the relative power and influence of states. Less obviously, the cultural history of Europe looks rather different when the distinctive nature of the Dutch Golden Age is taken into account, for in many ways Dutch cultural developments made a greater impact on the rest of Europe than is often realized. Dutch influence did not sweep as an unstoppable force across Europe in the way that the Renaissance had done, and its influence was usually subtle rather than obvious, yet it would be a serious mistake to neglect this aspect of European cultural history.

A standard view of the shape of the early modern European history emphasizes the dominance of Spain in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, then that of France in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth century. However, this perspective tends to ignore some of the more interesting developments of the period, such as the rapid rise and the equally rapid decline of Sweden and, in the case of the Dutch Republic, the creation of a completely new major state. Also the focus on Spain and France severely underplays the importance of economic power in this period. Spain was never a

powerful economic force, and the acquisition of a great empire in the Americas seems to have weakened rather than strengthened the home economy. France had greater economic potential than Spain but was overshadowed by the Dutch for much of the seventeenth century. The economic dynamic of the period was the shift of focus from the Mediterranean and especially northern Italy to northwest Europe, together with the linked rise of commercial capitalism, with first the Dutch and then the English as driving forces of innovation and change. Similarly, the concentration on Spain and France has distorted the picture of political development in early modern Europe, as it has helped to make the growth of princely power and the consolidation of the monarchical state one of the leading themes of the recent historiography of the period. However, the Dutch example is a sharp reminder that the continuing strength of representative institutions, and the persistence of the power of nobles and towns, are perhaps even more characteristic of the period. The success of the Dutch Republic, the eventual triumph of representative institutions in England, the partial rehabilitation of the Holy Roman Empire in recent studies, and the recognition that Poland-Lithuania survived as an effective state throughout the early modern period and only finally collapsed in the late eighteenth century are all reminders that there were viable alternatives to absolutist states in early modern Europe.

In terms of culture, the Dutch example similarly suggests that there were also viable alternatives to the baroque in seventeenth-century Europe. While Huizinga was perhaps oversimplifying when he denied that there were any elements of the baroque in Dutch culture of the Golden Age,<sup>1</sup> it is certainly true that Dutch art at least provides a sharp contrast to the style dominant in much of the rest of Europe at the time. More generally, it serves as a reminder that the Renaissance in the Netherlands had not been simply derivative of Italian developments, and that subsequently there had been an independent and distinctive tradition of art in the Low Countries. From Van Eyck to Pieter Bruegel the art of the so-called Flemish School was clearly a part of the Renaissance but with a character markedly different from that produced in Italy in very different political and social circumstances. Dutch painting in the seventeenth century was deeply influenced by this tradition of pictorial realism,

and it is in this sense that the Dutch School is a legitimate offspring of Renaissance innovations in art. More generally, a distinctive urban culture developed in the Low Countries from at least the late fifteenth century onwards and, although this was at first more marked in the leading towns of Flanders and Brabant, it also spread to the more northerly provinces, especially to the IJssel towns, Deventer, Zutphen and Kampen, and to the towns of Holland. Part of this Netherlands culture was a distinctive – and highly influential – humanist tradition from Erasmus to Lipsius which fed directly into Dutch achievements in this area of scholarship in the seventeenth century. Peculiar Netherlands conditions also encouraged more positive attitudes to religious toleration than was common in much of the rest of Europe, and scepticism regarding witchcraft prosecutions – if not the reality of witchcraft – surfaced earlier and more strongly here than elsewhere. So it is not only Dutch painting which provides an alternative to the conventional reading of early modern culture.

To what extent did the distinctive Dutch culture of the Golden Age resonate beyond the boundaries of the Dutch Republic? Absolutist and baroque Europe looked down on the Dutch both politically and culturally. As regards precedence in the world of formal diplomacy, the Republic had to accept a place below all the monarchies and, despite its military and naval power, even the much older republic of Venice. Similarly, Dutch cultural achievements were appreciated only in so far as they satisfied the conventional taste of the period. Nevertheless, it can be argued that Dutch influence was greater than was recognized at the time – or indeed later. At the very least it is clear that there were some areas of culture in which Dutch innovation and example made an indelible mark on European history.

The Dutch Golden Age is not usually seen as nurturing a military culture, but it must be remembered that the Dutch state originated in an armed revolt that led to eighty years, more or less, of war with Spain before full independence was achieved, and even after that point the Dutch could not avoid further conflict, first with England and then France. So war on both land and sea was an integral part of the Dutch experience in their Golden Age. Moreover, the way the Dutch fought the war against Spain played an important part in the transformation of European warfare which took place in the early modern period. When Michael Roberts first introduced

the idea of a military revolution in early modern Europe<sup>2</sup> he assigned a key role to the reform of the Dutch army carried out by Maurits and Willem Lodewijk of Nassau in the last decade of the sixteenth century. In this interpretation, the improvement in discipline and the changes in tactics introduced at this time were seminal, and were a direct influence on the Swedish army of Gustavus Adolphus, which for Roberts was the epitome of the transformation in the nature of warfare effected by what he called the Military Revolution. While the concept of the Military Revolution has seen many revisions and is now looking distinctly threadbare, there is little dispute about the influence of the Dutch military reforms on the development of warfare in Europe in the early seventeenth century, though not perhaps quite in the way that Roberts thought. At the turn of the century, the Spanish army of Flanders was the most vaunted military force in Europe, with the possible exception of the army of the Ottoman Empire, and the fact that the Dutch were now able at least to match it made an enormous impression throughout Europe. Admittedly the Dutch army's successes in the 1590s were largely due to the diversion of Spanish forces into France, but even after Spain made peace with Henri IV of France in 1598 the Dutch were able to fight the army of Flanders to a standstill, and this was recognized by the Twelve Years Truce, which was agreed at the treaty of Antwerp in 1609. However, it is not necessary to invoke the Military Revolution to explain this success.

Quite apart from the technical issues so beloved of a certain type of military historian, such as the introduction of volley-firing by musketeers, the most important foundations of Dutch military success at this crucial time for the survival of the nascent Dutch state were discipline and regular pay – the former being largely dependent on the latter. The Achilles heel of the Spanish army in the Netherlands was finance, and military efficiency was undermined all too often by mutinies by unpaid troops.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the financial situation of the new state may never have been easy, but enough money was always found to pay the army. The economy of Holland in particular was beginning to grow, and so the tax basis was expanding; the fear of defeat by Spain was effective in loosening the purse strings and persuading the provincial states to vote sufficient funds; and fewer troops were required for defence than attack, which gave

the Dutch rather more control over their expenditure than was possible for the Spanish. However, while other countries might admire such relative efficiency in the organization and administration of the army, this was not an example that most were in a position to imitate. One salient characteristic of warfare in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was that it had a marked tendency to cost more than governments could afford. Sooner or later prolonged warfare led to bankruptcy, as the Spanish case demonstrated repeatedly, and the only state for which this did not hold true was the Dutch Republic. Above all it was the financial strength of Holland which enabled the Dutch to win the Eighty Years War, and this was something that could be neither exported nor imitated.

On the other hand the tactical innovations and improved training of the Dutch army could be, and were, very influential. The Swedish army in the Thirty Years War adopted and improved Dutch battlefield practice, and helped to spread the new methods throughout Europe. However, the emphasis placed on the deployment of troops in battle is more than somewhat misleading since as far as the Dutch army is concerned as it fought very few major engagements. The Eighty Years War was above all a war of sieges: besieging and defending fortified towns and strong-points, together with manoeuvres by armies aimed at relieving sieges or preventing them from being relieved. There were frequent skirmishes but only a handful of real battles and the most famous of these – Nieuwpoort in 1600 – was a tactical victory but a strategic failure for the Dutch. The reputation of the Dutch army and of its most renowned generals, Maurits and Frederik Hendrik, was based on success in siege warfare, not on the battlefield. Particularly in the densely populated Netherlands, success was measured in terms of control of towns together with their associated territories, and the most admired commanders were those who could facilitate or relieve sieges through skilful manoeuvring without having to risk battle. Maurits in particular was averse to battles, as their outcomes were uncertain at best and were costly in men, while sieges suited his temperament far better as they could be much more carefully controlled. Of course, improved discipline and regular pay were an important part of Dutch military success, but what impressed contemporaries was their efficiency and skill in sieges together with the strength of the fortifications they constructed.

From the very beginning of the Revolt, the survival of the rebels was dependent on their defensive abilities. Their first major success was the defence of Leiden and its relief in 1574 after a siege by the Spanish which had lasted almost two years. At the start of the war there were few of the new *trace italienne* fortifications designed specifically for siege warfare in the age of cannon in the Netherlands, but in Holland and Zeeland at least there was an abundance of mud and water with which almost adequate defences could be improvised. However, as the war dragged on a group of military engineers emerged on the Dutch side who began to adapt the fortification system developed by Italian architects to conditions in the Netherlands. By the early years of the seventeenth century the Dutch had a wealth of experience in building, defending and attacking fortifications unmatched by any except their fellow belligerents, the Spanish. By this time the war in the Netherlands had become something like a training school for the new forms of warfare. Nobles and officers from all over Protestant Europe came to serve in the Dutch army; there were permanent English and Scots regiments in the Dutch forces, and regular recruitment from outside the Republic's borders was required to keep the army up to strength. Major sieges also became tourist attractions for the militarily inclined nobles of Europe; they were much easier to observe than battles, and the construction of approach works, the siting of batteries and in general the organization of both defence and attack could be observed in relative safety. The siege of Ostend (1601–4), although it eventually ended in a Dutch surrender, was a showcase of the new techniques in action and drew the fascinated attention of the European military world. After the end of the Truce in 1621, the progress of the final phase of the war continued to be marked by sieges: the fall of Breda (celebrated in a famous painting by Velázquez) was the last significant Spanish success, and then a string of Dutch gains including the taking of 's Hertogenbosch and Maastricht confirmed Frederik Hendrik's reputation as a master of siege-warfare.

Dutch techniques were also publicized by treatises on fortifications written by Dutch engineers, the most notable and possibly influential being by Simon Stevin, who also helped to set up a course at the university of Leiden in 1600 to train military engineers for the Dutch army. Seen in a longer perspective, Dutch theory and

practice built on the fortification systems developed in Italy in the early years of the sixteenth century and adapted them to the peculiar conditions in the northern Netherlands. The fortification system that emerged from the combination of Italian theory and Dutch experience influenced the design of fortresses and fortified towns throughout northern Europe, and Dutch military engineers were in great demand in the early seventeenth century. After the end of the Eighty Years War, the Dutch rather rested on their laurels with the slackening of immediate military pressure, but after 1672 the importance of effective and up-to-date fortifications again became impossible to ignore and in Menno van Coehoorn they produced one of the leading military engineers in late seventeenth-century Europe.

The Eighty Years War also provided experience in modern warfare for officers and men serving in the English and Scots regiments in the Dutch army. English soldiers had fought on the rebel side in the Revolt from almost its beginning, and after the treaty of Nonsuch in 1585 there was a permanent English military presence in the Netherlands. This allowed a military tradition to persist in certain families, such as the Veres, despite England's general failure to keep up with contemporary developments in European warfare. At the beginning of the civil wars in England the raw troops on both sides benefited from such experience, and the Scots similarly had to thank officers who had served in the Netherlands or Germany for the relative effectiveness of their army. It is worth noting that the first commander of the New Model Army, Sir Thomas Fairfax, came from a family with strong connections to the war in the Netherlands. His grandfather had a brother who was killed during the siege of Ostend and had himself served under Sir Francis Vere in the Netherlands, while three of Sir Thomas's uncles had been killed during the early years of the war in the Holy Roman Empire. So it was entirely in his family tradition when Fairfax served under another Vere in the Dutch army for a few years from 1629 (at the same time as others who would play a notable part in the early days of the civil wars, Sir John Hotham and Philip Skippon).<sup>4</sup> So while both English and Scots fought in various armies during the Thirty Years War, by far the strongest link with modern warfare for both countries was a long tradition of service in the Dutch army, reflecting an ideological preference as well as a practical convenience.

An unexpected result of the conflict in the Netherlands, and one that had considerable resonance in intellectual circles throughout Europe, was the stimulus given to interest in neo-stoicism by the writings of the greatest humanist of the later sixteenth century, Justus Lipsius. Like many contemporaries Lipsius experienced the Revolt more as a painful civil war than as a patriotic struggle against Spain, and he invoked the classical stoic tradition to help deal with the dilemmas the conflict threw up. As Lipsius moved from teaching at the young university of Leiden to return to Spanish obedience at Louvain, the title of his most famous work, *De constantia* (On Constancy), can strike an ironic note, but it was an admonition to retreat to inner peace as a way of dealing with all too turbulent political and social times. As such it struck a chord not just in the Netherlands but in France, which was just emerging from over thirty years of intermittent civil war, and Germany, where the intractable internal problems that were to lead to an even worse conflict were already becoming all too apparent.

The influence of Dutch military culture on the rest of Europe was perhaps brief, though no less powerful for that, but Dutch expansion into the East Indies and the Americas also brought Dutch armed forces into the extra-European world, though other aspects of their culture made more of a lasting impact. Trade was the main aim and tool of Dutch overseas expansion in this period, and though the Dutch were prepared to use armed force where they felt it to be necessary, this was not essentially an empire of conquest but of commerce. They came to control large areas in the East by the end of the century, but as a by-product of their commercial drive rather than the result of an appetite for colonies. It can be argued that the cultural impact of the Dutch in the East was minimal, though this is perhaps to underestimate the effects of the distinctive commercial capitalism which characterized the Dutch colonial expansion in this period.

From the 1590s onwards the Dutch built up a trading network which was worldwide in its range. At the heart of this commercial expansion were the two major chartered trading companies: the East India Company (VOC), founded in 1602, and the much less successful West India Company (WIC), founded in 1621. The initial aim of the VOC was a monopoly of the spice trade but, despite their conquest



of the Moluccas and the Banda Islands which brought them control of some spices including cloves and nutmeg, this was never quite within their grasp. This failure is not surprising given the vast area in which the Dutch had to operate. Nevertheless, from a headquarters in the newly founded Batavia (later Djakarta) in Java, the company set up a network of trading posts from Persia to Japan, including both coasts of India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and, briefly, Taiwan. In addition to transporting Asian goods to Europe, the company was heavily involved in inter-Asian trade with the aim of using the profit thus generated to minimize the amount of bullion it had to ship out from Europe to pay for Asian commodities. Although its primary aim was trade, by the end of the seventeenth century the VOC was in control of much of Java and Sri Lanka as well as the Spice Islands. The cultural impact of the creation of this empire of trade was undoubtedly greater on the Dutch than on Asia, but the prolonged Dutch presence was not without its effects. Apart from the frequency of Dutch surnames in Sri Lanka, much of the traceable effects of their presence in Asia stems from the Dutch East Indies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries rather than the nearly two centuries of VOC activity in the East which preceded it. Dutch numbers were small, the disease environment was lethal for Europeans, and the Dutch were meeting highly developed cultures which had little need of anything the Dutch had to offer. Yet the Dutch did bring the spirit of capitalism, if not quite the Protestant ethic, to Asia, and the impact of their ruthless focus on profit and the deployment of economic resources and commercial skills was considerable, though impossible to quantify. The company also brought the dubious blessing of Western medicine to Asia, and among the company's employees were some who were eager to study the flora and fauna of this world that was new to them, making records, collecting specimens and sending them back to the Republic. So the new scientific methods of Europe were beginning to be employed to redescribe Asian phenomena, which was in the end a more ambitious and successful colonial endeavour than anything else the Dutch could achieve. Oddly enough the most obvious effects of the Dutch presence were probably felt in Japan, although they were restricted to a single and carefully guarded trading post. From around 1640, the Dutch were the only Europeans allowed even such a limited contact with Japan, and the Japanese developed a sort of

European Studies programme based on their observation of the Dutch. When Japan was forced to open up to the rest of the world more than two centuries later, this peculiar expertise proved less helpful than they seem to have expected.

The WIC was much less successful than the VOC largely because the situation in the Americas was very different to that in Asia, but also because the company's aims were much less well defined. Whereas the VOC let little get in the way of profit, the WIC was less clearly focused: founded in 1621 as the truce with Spain expired, it was conceived in part as a means of undermining Spanish power by attacking its empire in America, but it also tried to found colonies and was attracted by the profits to be made from privateering. In the end the colonial enterprises in Brazil and New Netherland failed, and by 1674 the Dutch were only able to hold on to Surinam and a few islands in the Caribbean. Although the WIC controlled a good part of Brazil for over a decade, they could make little or no impact on the well-established Portuguese culture of the region, and were themselves left with few tangible gains from the experience, except a few paintings by Frans Post. In contrast, although New Netherland lasted less than fifty years, being first conquered by England in 1665 and coming definitively under English control in 1674, the Dutch influence here proved more lasting, though not without its ambiguities. New Netherland was a colony of settlement, and by the time of the English takeover there was a substantial population in the colony with a firmly established set of political, religious and social institutions which proved to have considerable staying power. It is true that the WIC was never consistent in its treatment of New Netherland, but it did make intermittent attempts to attract settlers to the colony. The company tried to attract groups of religious radicals to the colony but, lacking the push factor of persecution, not much came of it. More successful was the plan to grant large tracts of land together with semi-seigneurial rights to *patroons* who would then bring or send colonists over to settle the area. In terms of climate and disease environment New Netherland was much more favourable than the East Indies for European settlement and the indigenous population sparser and considerably more vulnerable, and at the time of the English take-over there were around 7–8,000 settlers in the colony.<sup>5</sup> The influence of the Dutch language and

particularly the Dutch Reformed Church remained influential in the region of New York state from the coast up to Albany (formerly Beverwijck) for a century or more, and less obvious signs of Dutch influence can be perceived even later.

However, there is some doubt as to what extent the settlers in the colony during WIC rule really were Dutch in any meaningful sense. The suspicion is that indigenous Dutch were not easily persuaded to emigrate to the New World: the home economy was prosperous and the Republic was relatively tolerant as far as religion was concerned so the major pull and push factors for migration were largely absent. It seems that many of the settlers in New Netherlands were foreigners, or recent immigrants to the Republic who were more prepared to move on than were the Dutch as a whole. In the context of cultural impact, however, this question is perhaps less pressing, as it would seem that most of the settlers had already taken the Dutch language and institutions as their own before the English takeover. A notable example is Beverwijck: it may have been little more than a large village by the standards of Holland, but in terms of its political, social and religious institutions it was clearly a Dutch town in miniature.<sup>6</sup> Whatever their origins, it would seem that the inhabitants of the former New Netherland clung stubbornly to their Dutch identity in the face of English rule.

The seventeenth century was not a period of great technological innovation, but the Dutch were adept at developing and refining existing technologies, such as improvements in the efficiency of windmills and in the design of cargo ships. The textile industries of Leiden and Haarlem employed up-to-date techniques, but mostly these had been brought in by immigrants from the Southern Netherlands rather than being the result of native Dutch ingenuity. The ready market for Dutch woollen and linen cloths, however, encouraged their rivals to copy these techniques, and so the Republic acted as a sort of technological middle-man, bringing in new ideas from elsewhere and exporting them to new markets – though the process in this case was less profitable than distributing Asian goods in a spice-hungry Europe. In one area of expertise, however, the Dutch were already unrivalled: water-control and land drainage. In the seventeenth century they began to export this hard-won experience to other areas of Europe.

The inhabitants of the coastal regions of the northern Netherlands had a long history of dealing with the water problems inevitable for very low-lying land, struggling not only with encroachments from the sea but with the difficulty of controlling the water from the great rivers which drained into this region. This struggle seems to have intensified in the sixteenth century with more frequent storm-floods and persistent problems in protecting agricultural land from inundation, but this proved the stimulus for a period of unprecedented land reclamation lasting from the late sixteenth century until around 1640. This immense project produced a generation of hydraulic engineers far ahead of any other country as far as experience and expertise were concerned, and they began to export these skills, with such major schemes as the draining of the Fens being planned and executed by Dutch engineers and workmen under the direction of Cornelis Vermuyden. In France too large areas of marshland was reclaimed under the direction of Dutch experts. In these Dutch successes, the techniques used were not particularly innovative – for example the improvement in windmill design was useful but hardly revolutionary – and it was the way in which the Dutch were able to utilize existing technology more effectively that was at the heart of their success. An outstanding example is their use of wind power for water-pumps: the windmills may not in themselves have been much more efficient, it was the way in which they were deployed and in particular the large numbers used which made them so effective.

Similarly, the Dutch shipbuilding industry made no great technological breakthroughs but gained pre-eminence in Europe by means of improved design and more efficient production methods. The aim of Dutch shipwrights was to produce efficient cargo ships and the *fluit*, reputedly first built in Hoorn in the 1590s, was a prime example of their achievements. The *fluit* was a specialized bulk carrier which could be handled by a small crew and had a low draught to enable it to access Dutch harbours. It was heavily employed in the Baltic grain trade and in carrying Scandinavian timber to the Republic. It had the drawback of vulnerability to attack by enemy warships or privateers and required naval protection in time of war, but nevertheless its introduction marked the triumph of the purpose-built cargo ship over more easily defendable but less efficient ships. The efficiency of

such ships is demonstrated by the sheer size of the Dutch trading fleet in the seventeenth century, but also in the way that shipbuilding became a important export industry. So the Dutch example transformed the profile of European shipping – at least in European waters, for more heavily armed ships were needed in the East and the Americas. Partly this was through purchase of Dutch-built ships, partly by copying Dutch designs and sometimes through more brutal means. The large-scale capture of Dutch merchant shipping in the First Anglo-Dutch War is said to have formed the basis for the rapid growth of the English merchant fleet in the second half of the century. However, it was not just good design which enabled Dutch shipbuilding to prosper: equally important was the development of a particularly efficient system of production, working within existing technology. The industry increasingly centred on the Zaan region to the west of Amsterdam, where there was a concentration of wind-powered sawmills as well as ancillary industries such as sail- and rope-making. The wood was brought from Scandinavia in specialized timber-carrying ships to Hoorn, from where it was moved the short distance to the Zaan along inland waterways. The sawmills processed the timber, often into prefabricated pieces to speed up the shipbuilding process. The Zaan even had its specialized bakers of ship's biscuits to complete the fitting-out of the newly built ships. The result was that, though having no particular technological advantages over shipbuilders in the rest of Europe, the Zaan industry was able to become a major exporter of ships and fishing boats. So by the late seventeenth century merchant ships built in Dutch shipyards or copied from Dutch designs were ubiquitous along the sea lanes and in the harbours of Europe.

Along the North Sea Coast and the shores of the Baltic such merchant ships would often enter ports protected by fortresses built by Dutch engineers, or at least constructed along lines heavily influenced by Dutch theory and practice. In some cases, too, the new fortress towns had been influenced by Dutch vernacular architecture or, as in the case of parts of southern Sweden, economic penetration had encouraged urban construction along Dutch lines. Indeed, Dutch gables and other characteristic touches could also be found in south Lincolnshire where the fen workers had lived, and traces of Dutch urban planning could be seen throughout the reach

of Dutch commercial power, from Albany to Batavia. The visual impact of Dutch influence was not as obvious or flamboyant as that of French or Italian baroque architecture but it was perhaps just as far-reaching.

For much of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Netherlands acted as a mediator between the culture of the Renaissance in Italy and to a lesser extent France, and northern Europe. Humanists, writers and artists in the Low Countries imported Renaissance thought and art and re-exported them in a more easily digestible form to Germany and Scandinavia; they were indeed a cultural entrepôt throughout the whole period and not just in the later seventeenth century.<sup>7</sup> However, the Netherlands in the sixteenth and the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century did not simply pass on what they imported from the south but modified it to a greater or lesser extent, so that the northern Renaissance was deeply influenced by the cultural climate of the Low Countries.

This was particularly true of Renaissance humanism, which was already displaying a distinctive character in the Netherlands by the end of the fifteenth century. Erasmus can stand for a whole generation of humanists in the Netherlands in the early sixteenth century: although his popularity encompassed all of Renaissance Europe, he nevertheless remained very much a product of the region in which he was born and educated. Apart from immense erudition and a penchant for the ostentatious, though often playful, display of his knowledge of obscure classical texts – a part of the insistent one-upmanship inherent in the highly competitive world of early modern humanism – the writings of Erasmus are marked by a combination of sharp criticism of institutions which failed to live up to their ideals with an abhorrence of fanaticism from whatever side. He was a moderate and mediator by temperament, and has been claimed as the direct ancestor of tolerant and ecumenical thinkers such as Coornhert and, later, Grotius and Episcopius. The Netherlands continued to be an important centre for classical philology, and this tradition survived the divisions and disruptions caused by the Revolt. Some of the outstanding humanist scholars of the later sixteenth century came from the Netherlands or were drawn to it: Lipsius may have switched from Leiden to Louvain, and thus from the rebels to the Spanish, but his work showed greater consistency; and even in the

uncertain early years of the Republic the young university Leiden was able to attract the pre-eminent French humanist Joseph Justus Scaliger. This leading role in northern European humanism was inherited by the rebel North rather than the ultimately obedient South, and Leiden and to a lesser extent the other newly founded Dutch universities rapidly became respected centres of classical studies and philology. Although he never had a position at a university, Grotius was clearly a product of this tradition both in the nature of his erudition and in his readiness to employ his learning as a guide to practical action in public affairs. For the humanist, classical learning was not simply an academic specialism but the most important guide for both private and public life with direct implications for politics, law and religion. It is true that Gerard Johannes Vossius, one of the most eminent humanists of the early seventeenth century, seems to have felt uncomfortable in post-Dordt Leiden because of his Remonstrant sympathies and connections, but he found a haven in the Athenaeum in Amsterdam. Despite such disruptions, Leiden continued to attract leading foreign scholars, including the eminent if often uncomfortably combative Salmasius.

In the seventeenth century Dutch humanists, both inside and outside the universities, continued to exercise considerable influence, especially in Europe north of the Alps. Daniel Heinsius' writings on literary theory were taken up by French humanists and through them helped to shape the classical drama of Corneille and Racine, though his reputation as a scholar was overshadowed by that of the exiled Grotius. The prestige of Dutch classicists and philologists was increased by the disruption to the universities of central Europe during the Thirty Years War. Another advantage the Dutch had was the expertise of publishers in Holland; nowhere else was there such an effective combination of skilled typesetting, even of ancient oriental languages, and of proofreaders capable of checking not only Latin but more recondite texts. A core activity of humanists from the very beginning had been the editing of classical texts and, while an enormous amount had already been achieved by the end of the sixteenth century, improved editions continued to be produced and there was still much to be done as regards the interpretation of such texts. The move of Dutch philologists into the comparative study of ancient near-eastern languages as well as an improved understanding of

Latin and Greek texts gave a new impetus to classical studies at this time. In general the Dutch continued to be the leading voice of Renaissance humanism throughout the seventeenth century, although by its later years the movement was beginning to lose some of its momentum. By this point developments in science – not least in the Republic itself – were beginning to undermine the authority of classical culture, and the Dutch pre-Enlightenment was tentatively preparing to abandon the whole Renaissance project of the restoration of ancient civilization for the seductive idea of progress.

More peculiar to the Golden Age was the part that literature in Dutch played in mediating between the Renaissance and northern Europe. The Renaissance attempt to bring ancient literature back to life led to a revival of classical Latin, and this neo-Latin poetry and drama flourished in the sixteenth century, not least in the Netherlands of Janus Secundus. However, from Petrarch onwards there were also powerful movements to emulate the achievements of classical literature in the vernacular. The Italian, or rather Tuscan, of Petrarch served as a model, and the influence of his sonnets can still be seen in those of Shakespeare, but whereas French and other Romance languages could follow this example fairly easily, it was rather more difficult for the Germanic languages. In the seventeenth century poetry and drama in Dutch smoothed the transmission of Renaissance classical ideals and practice to the literature of Germanic Europe: first through showing that Dutch – and so other similar languages – could be a proper medium for literature in accordance with Renaissance precepts; and, second, by demonstrating that even those perfectly capable of producing respectable neo-Latin verse were not above writing in the vernacular. That Daniel Heinsius, one of the most respected humanists of the early seventeenth century, should lend his prestige to literature in the vernacular by publishing a collection of verse in Dutch was an important indication of changing attitudes among the educated. Neo-Latin literature was still respected, but its inexorable decline can be traced from this point. That is not to say that Heinsius' poetry was particularly impressive as poetry, and the example of rather better poets had a more significant impact on literary developments in Germany and Scandinavia. Poets writing in (High) German such as Martin Opitz acknowledged their debt to the Dutch example, and the literary



Renaissance finally reached the German-speaking region through the mediation of Dutch writers.

In the course of the seventeenth century the Dutch Republic became a major centre of Reformed theology, and with the rise of Arminianism in England and the crushing of the Huguenots in France the Dutch Reformed Church became perhaps the most influential voice in orthodox Calvinism. At the same time the Republic was also one of the main sources of ecumenical Protestantism, and produced some of the most notable proponents of religious toleration. It might be added that the practice of religious toleration in the Republic was potentially as influential as any theoretical justification, as it demonstrated at the very least that the presence of religious dissidents did not necessarily lead either to the collapse of the state into anarchy or to devastating punishment from God for blasphemy. Whether many contemporaries were willing to understand and accept a message which ran so contrary to some of their key assumptions about the relationship between church and state – not to mention humanity and God – is quite another matter, though the Dutch example was undoubtedly an important inspiration to supporters of greater toleration throughout Europe. It seems clear, for example, that the most famous treatise in favour of religious toleration produced in this period, John Locke's *Letter on Toleration*, was to a significant extent a product of his years as an exile in the Republic.

Although the Reformed Church could command the adherence of only a minority of the Dutch population until well into the seventeenth century, it nevertheless became the official church of the new state from the very beginning. From the Synod of Dordt onwards the members of the Reformed Church had, in principle at least, a monopoly of public office and one of the consequences of this effective monopoly was that membership of the Reformed Church was a prerequisite for holding a chair in theology at any of the Dutch universities. The result was that, despite the relatively high degree of religious pluralism in the Republic, it was nevertheless able to become one of the major powerhouses of the Reformed movement. The relative importance of the Dutch church in the Calvinist world was increased through the sufferings of Reformed Protestantism in the Holy Roman Empire during the Thirty Years War, which included the sacking of the University of Heidelberg, the intellectual

heart of German Calvinism. The Huguenot academies were renowned centres of Reformed theology but they were increasingly hampered and finally closed down by the French state. The situation in England was more complicated, but it is safe to say that the dominance of Reformed theology in both the Church of England and in Oxford and Cambridge was challenged with increasing success in the course of the seventeenth century by a number of forces, from the combative Arminianism encouraged by Charles I to the more judicious moderation of Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, leaving it possible for some to begin to make the entirely unhistorical claim that the Anglican Church was neither Protestant nor Catholic but some centaur-like amalgam of both. After the upheavals of the Civil Wars and Commonwealth, there were still Reformed theologians at Oxford and Cambridge, but they were no longer the force they once were either at home or in the broader Reformed community.

Paradoxically, it was the dispute between Remonstrants and Contra-remonstrants in the early years of the century which gave the Dutch Reformed Church the opportunity to play a leading role in Europe for the first time: the Synod of Dordt which condemned the Remonstrants was attended by representatives of the Reformed churches of Europe, and its decisions became the universally accepted definitions of Reformed orthodoxy. By the later years of the century, the Dutch Republic had become both the political and the theological leader of Protestant Europe, although the Lutheran churches might have disputed this claim. Faced with the threat of Louis XIV's France, which was experienced in Protestant Europe as religious as much as political, the Dutch led a series of coalitions to curb what was perceived as French aggression. The Republic came to be regarded as the last great bulwark of Protestantism in Europe, especially when the Catholic James II was on the English throne. In what was perhaps their most spectacular action of the whole century, the Dutch also made the decisive move in the political and religious confrontation between James and his opponents when Willem III invaded England. This daring move set off a chain of events which led to James' exile and to Willem, together with his wife, Mary (the daughter of James), claiming the throne of England. However, in a way this dramatic success also marked the beginning of the end for Dutch leadership in Europe. From this point on England was

increasingly the dominant partner in the coalitions against France, and in the end also took over the role of Protestant champion from the Dutch. Dutch theologians, however, continued to have an important voice in Reformed Europe in the eighteenth century, though now they were perhaps in the main rather more in tune with the Christian Enlightenment than with the spirit of Dordt.

The aftermath of the Synod of Dordt, however, also gave new impetus to thinking about religious toleration. The Remonstrants could no longer hope to win over the Reformed Church to their interpretation of the faith, and so had either to confess their errors and return to the Church or to found a separate church. Those who chose separation then had to justify breaking away from the Reformed Church, and to find arguments why their new church should be allowed freedom of worship. They were not, of course, starting from scratch: there was already a strong tradition of toleration stretching back to Erasmus and including Coornhert at the end of the sixteenth century. In addition the Republic already allowed freedom of conscience, so the debate could move on to the issue of the extent to which public worship by dissenters should be allowed. Up to this point the Remonstrants had argued for the toleration of a wide range of views within the Reformed Church, while still supporting that church's privileged position within the Republic, but now they had to argue in favour of some degree at least of religious pluralism in order to be able to worship freely. In response to this challenge Remonstrants from Episcopius to Jean Le Clerc and Philippus van Limborch become leading exponent of a moderate religious toleration which embraced most Protestants but still excluded the Catholic Church, if not Catholics. The exclusion of the Catholic Church was not simply a result of prejudice, but was based on a very real fear of the power and unremitting hostility of the Counter-Reformation Church. Even the more liberal of Protestant publicists and theologians believed that the Church was too dangerous to be allowed complete freedom. In the eyes of Protestants of all shades the seventeenth century could be seen as a series of long and unambiguous object lessons demonstrating the Catholic peril, from the ruthless suppression of Bohemian Protestantism after the battle of the White Mountain in 1620, through the plight of the Vaudois Protestants in the 1650s, to the repression of the Huguenots

in France and culminating in the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes by the French crown in 1685. To believe that the Peace of Westphalia brought an end to the role of religion in international conflict is a profound misunderstanding of late seventeenth-century Europe: for Protestants the religious wars were far from over and the faith far from secure. The French king and the papacy, with the mediation of the Jesuits, were generally believed to be working together to further the interests of their religion, and France's aggressive foreign policy was seen as threatening not only the political independence of Protestant states but also their religion.<sup>8</sup> Only in the eighteenth century did such paranoid views begin to weaken, and even then they could be easily stirred up again.

However, there was no suggestion from these proponents of toleration that there should be pressure on Catholics as individuals – for them, the Church, not the Catholic laity, was the enemy. Otherwise they argued that a broad range of Protestant churches and sects should be tolerated, though most argued that atheists were beyond the pale. This condemnation of atheists, however, should probably not be seen as a form of religious intolerance, as the arguments against them were basically political: all morality was assumed to stem from religion, so anyone without religious beliefs was by definition immoral and thus unfit for a place in a civilized society. The grounds put forward for a relatively liberal version of what was tolerable varied from the ecumenical attitude, which argued that most of the issues which divided the churches should be seen as *adiaphora* – matters of minor importance or, indeed as being beyond human comprehension – to the recognition that there was more than one pathway to God. The latter was in effect a much more radical break with the dominant understanding of the nature of religious truth in the early modern period. It may be, on the other hand, that the writings of the Remonstrants and their allies had less of an impact on the rest of Europe than the example of the practice of toleration in the Republic itself. The success of the new Dutch state and its impressive achievements in both peace and war demonstrated more powerfully than any treatise that a polity that tolerated more than one faith could be both politically stable and economically prosperous. In addition the fact that the Dutch Republic had survived great dangers – most recently the French invasion in 1672 –

suggested strongly that God had no great desire to impose a collective punishment for blasphemy. The theorists might have made a plausible case for toleration being desirable, the history of the Republic in the seventeenth century demonstrated that it was both feasible and a practical and even preferable alternative to religious conflict.

It is a curious circumstance that intense and even vicious polemics concerning religion remained typical for the Republic in this century, while for the most part the various religious groups were able to co-exist with relatively little conflict. It is notable that visceral fear of Catholicism was endemic in England throughout the seventeenth century despite the fact that there were very few Catholics in the country, while the Republic with its large and – by the middle of the century – well-organized Catholic population suffered few such terrors. It is true that there was at times some unease during the Eighty Years War, and Catholic co-operation with the French invaders in 1672 caused some resentment, but there were no anti-Catholic riots and certainly no equivalent of the English Popish Plot. The acceptance of a wide variety of Protestant groups went even more smoothly and, indeed, the only threats of violent religious conflict came from disputes within the Reformed Church, most seriously in the Remonstrant/Contra-remonstrant controversy during the Twelve Years Truce, but later in the century also conflict between hard-liners and liberals threatened to get out of hand at one point, though the civil authorities were in the end able to hold the ring. So the Republic could be seen as a practical demonstration that religious toleration could work, and this was something that foreign visitors noticed even if they did not always approve. It was during his years of exile in the Republic that John Locke wrote his *Letter on Toleration*, and this key document in the history of religious toleration was undoubtedly deeply affected by his experience in Holland of its possibilities. The religious settlement in England after the revolution of 1688 was similarly inspired by the situation in the Republic, not least because of the close involvement of Willem III and his Dutch advisers. The Dutch example and Dutch contributions to toleration theory played a major part in smoothing the way for the transformation in thinking about religion which characterized the Enlightenment in the following century.

Dutch painting of the Golden Century may have been regarded by the cognoscenti as not quite great art, but it was nevertheless influential at the time, though this impact was considerably less than than it would be on later generations in Europe and the world. Dutch painting made an impression on the rest of Europe in a number of ways: artists such as Rembrandt and Vermeer established a reputation far beyond Dutch borders, but the most noticeable impact came through the export of both works of art and artists.

Quite apart from the quality of the work of the leading artists, one of the most remarkable features of Dutch painting was the sheer volume of production. Calculations of the number of paintings produced during the century are necessarily crude and include a great many which only the most determined of relativists would regard as art, but it does seem clear that the domestic market for art must have been saturated by the second half of the century if not earlier. This overproduction of paintings was the result of an overproduction of painters and as with any other manufactures the answer was to export – both paintings and painters. Little is known about the cheaper end of the market, though it is known that there was a regular trade in ‘tronies’ – anonymous simple head and shoulders portraits – and the like to England. Indeed, it seems that the Dutch were able to supply a product for which there was considerable demand in England but which native painters were not yet able to satisfy. There is an interesting parallel here with the way in which for much of the seventeenth century the Dutch provided England with economic services it was not yet able to provide for itself. The English had shaken off Dutch economic tutelage by the end of the century, but it was well into the following century before they could assert their full artistic independence. In the earlier part of the seventeenth century Flemish artists had been able to compete successfully with the Dutch – and were perhaps rather more skilled in producing the flattering portraits in demand at the courts of James I and Charles I – but later they were squeezed out by the Dutch. An outstanding example of Dutch artists making a career in England is the partnership of Willem van de Velde, father and son. They were the most renowned painters of battles at sea of the era, and much of their production concerned the naval wars between England and the Republic in the third quarter of the century. They were brought over to England by Charles II,

given a studio in Greenwich palace, and worked for the English court for much of the rest of their lives. Less spectacular but perhaps more typical of the impact of Dutch painting on England was the curious phenomenon of the country house painting. After the end of the civil wars many of the English gentry began to rebuild their country houses, and itinerant Dutch painters toured the country offering to paint portraits of these imposing constructions, often with the family of the owner in the foreground. It seems that outside London there were too few trained artists to provide such services and that Dutch painters, underemployed at home, were successfully filling the gap. Although Germany did not offer quite such a lack of domestic competition as England, there were nevertheless similar openings here for both Dutch paintings and painters. The market in France and Italy was both more crowded and the prevailing taste in art markedly different, but even here there was some appreciation of Dutch art, and stylistic influences did not just travel one way.

The art of the Dutch School as a whole differed greatly both in style and subject-matter from what was admired in the rest of Europe and so its immediate influence was distinctly limited though not wholly absent. Rembrandt was an exception as usual: his portraits and history paintings, particularly those with biblical subjects, fitted far better with conventional taste, and to some extent he achieved the European reputation he had craved as a young artist. However, even he was criticized for what were felt to be lapses in good taste, and his later work faded out of fashion. Other Dutch portraitists were also well regarded, but while Lely – admittedly not born, but trained in the Republic – achieved European fame in the later seventeenth century, the extraordinary achievements of Frans Hals were only recognized at home. Landscape and townscape painting had a little more contemporary resonance, and the Italian *veduta* painters of the late seventeenth and eighteenth century were clearly inspired to a significant extent by the work of Jan van der Heyden, Gerrit Adriaensz. Berckheyde and others, and so English visitors to Venice on their Grand Tour who collected the paintings of Canaletto and Guardi so assiduously were indirectly absorbing yet another Dutch influence. Dutch landscapes also won a certain reputation outside the Republic at the time, but their full art historical force was only felt rather later.

Dutch painters in the Golden Age worked in many different styles and appealed to a wide range of tastes. Some of these painters and styles found buyers and patrons outside the Republic, and were recognized as artists of note. Certain of the genre painters, especially from the Leiden school of so-called fine painting, were appreciated for their delicate craftsmanship, despite the banality of their subject matter. Nicolaes Maes, for example, produced the sort of meticulously crafted domestic interiors which could be admired by connoisseurs everywhere, and Gerard ter Borch and Gabriel Metsu also produced works which could be admired for their technical qualities as well as their narrative content. On the other hand the more rumbustious paintings by Jan Steen seem to have remained a domestic taste, and Vermeer was not regarded as anything out of the ordinary – one foreign visitor remarking that his paintings were overpriced. Similarly, landscapes and seascapes attracted a certain amount of attention, especially in northern Europe, but such subjects continued in the main to be considered as necessarily below the level of great art. In general, it can be said that while the technical skill of many Dutch artists was recognized and even admired, it was still felt that they lacked that combination of spirit and intellect which allowed the masters to achieve true art. The history painters came nearest to meeting these criteria, but it must be admitted that their art remained pretty run of the mill and certainly paled by comparison with Rubens, for example. What for a long time has been regarded as the best and most typical work of the Dutch School was largely unappreciated by contemporaries, and was certainly not regarded as the breakthrough to a new conception of what art should and could be. For the full impact of Dutch painting, a much longer perspective is needed.

In the long term the Dutch School came to be recognized as one of the great movements in Western art history, and all the more remarkable for its lack of self-conscious innovation. Unlike the Renaissance, and certainly in contrast to later revolutionary movements in art, Dutch painters did not repudiate the past and most of them do not seem to have striven to do anything more outrageous than try to make a decent living by responding to the opportunities of the market. There were no manifestos proclaiming a new ideal in art, and Dutch painting had to struggle against the continuing



domination of the Renaissance concept of what great art should be. Nevertheless, the influence of Dutch art was already beginning to be strongly felt in the eighteenth century. Dutch painters of the Golden Age, for example, had a seminal influence on the development of English landscape painting in the following century, first in water-colour and then in oils, and the art of Constable and even Turner owes them a considerable debt. Genre painting too rose in critical estimation, particularly the work of such painstakingly tasteful artists as Gerrit Dou. However, while the prestige of the Dutch School undoubtedly increased in the course of the eighteenth century, and was already beginning to be seen as a considerable achievement, even at the end of the century it still had to contend with a form of art-critical snobbery which looked above all to classical ideals of beauty and regarded Dutch painting as irredeemably mundane.

In contrast, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Dutch art of the Golden Age was denigrated by new generations of critics and connoisseurs not only for not emulating Renaissance art but also for its perceived failure to rise above simple realism. At a time when the development of photography spurred artists and critics to defend true art at the cost of denying the claims of photographic realism, the Dutch School seemed to be one of the weakest points in their arguments. It could be argued that if such meticulous depictions of the world were art, then so was photography, at least potentially. Only the rediscovery of Vermeer, perhaps, opened the eyes of many to the realization that the best of Dutch artists used light and colour in ways that transcended simple realism, and it began to be understood that apparently raw slices of life were in fact as carefully composed as any subject of self-consciously artistic photography. In the continuum between realism and naturalism, it became clear that there was very little of the latter in Dutch painting. Nevertheless, the realistic depiction of scenes from everyday life, and of the surface reality of the Dutch countryside and towns was recognized as the essence of Dutch painting to be praised or damned according to taste and critical agenda.

There was, however, and continues to be a major problem with the idea of the Dutch School: it is to an extent the creation of critics and collectors, and excludes much that was painting in the Republic during the Golden Age. It should have been obvious from the start

that the towering figure of Rembrandt contradicted much of what was held to be the essence of the School. With the exception of his portraits and self-portraits, Rembrandt was a history painter with all that implied in terms of subject-matter and treatment. His chosen subjects were suitable for great art, and if the execution was flawed in contemporary eyes, the intention was not. Yet already by the late eighteenth century a fixed conception of what was best and most typical in Dutch art had already been established, and connoisseurs and collectors favoured those paintings which were thought to represent those qualities. In particular when the great national collections were built up in the nineteenth century they had to include alongside Italian and Flemish Renaissance art at least some genre, landscape and portraits from the Dutch School – and anything by Rembrandt. The view of Dutch painting in the seventeenth century was also obscured to an extent by the rising tide of nationalism which spread through Europe in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, bringing with it the conviction that each nation had a separate and distinct identity which was expressed – or should be – through its institutions and culture. The Dutch looked back to their Golden Century and saw themselves as the ideal *burger*, sober, hard-working and undemonstratively pious – while foreign commentators sometimes expressed these qualities in less complimentary terms. This image of what was quintessentially Dutch reinforced the prevailing conception of what constituted the proper character of the Dutch School. If the cultural duty, as it were, of art was to be an authentic representation of a nation's identity, then Dutch seventeenth century painting should give expression to those *burger* values which were now seen as the core of that identity. By the same token paintings which failed to express these values could not be regarded as either part of the School proper, or indeed as having any particular merit. So by the late nineteenth century the Dutch School had become recognized as a coherent artistic movement with a distinct style, though its theoretical rationale had to be supplied by later art historians and critics as the painters themselves seem to have been unaware that they were doing anything unusual, let alone that they were in effect challenging contemporary notions as to the proper nature of art.

As a consequence of this fixed idea about the character and limits of Dutch art in the Golden Age, art historians tended to see what

they expected to see, and this led to serious distortions in their accounts of Dutch painting. Most obvious was the sidelining of anything than did not fit into this hegemonic preconception: the Utrecht painters of Italianate landscapes were treated almost as a curious anomaly, but they did after all paint landscapes, even if not in the 'pure' Dutch style. The history painter Pieter Lastman was only of interest for his influence on Rembrandt, others only as Rembrandt's pupils, and in general the great variety of art produced in the Republic was marginalized as of only minor interest. More subtle, and probably more important, was the attention given to the realist elements in Dutch painting at the expense of other ways in which they could be understood. The extent to which landscapes, townscapes and even church interiors were composed was underestimated or perhaps not realized, and so the degree to which Dutch realism was not simply a description of physical reality was also not realized. Yet there were critical counter-currents, the most important of which flowed from the contrasting work of Rembrandt and Vermeer. Rembrandt had been recognized as an important painter even in his own time, and in the following centuries his stature has only grown. Yet it should have been obvious that while his portraits and self-portraits could be seen as some of the greatest works of the 'Dutch School', his history paintings most certainly could not. So right at the heart of the Dutch School was an anomaly: a giant figure who refused to be easily categorized, and who also lent himself – unlike any other artist of the period – to highly romanticized versions of his life and struggles as an artist, as if he were an early Impressionist or a pioneer of Modernism challenging conventional wisdom and morals. In contrast it was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that Vermeer emerged from the pack of competent genre painters and his peculiar qualities began to be recognized. In particular his extraordinary use of light and colour clearly transcended naive realist interpretations of his paintings, and the overt symbolism in some of his works also suggested that the content of Dutch genre paintings might reward further study. The art world was now able to see Vermeer with new eyes and he began to be recognized as one of the truly great figures of Western art, and all the more intriguing perhaps because of the contrast in both style and life with Rembrandt. Perhaps even more surprising has been the recent

rise of Vermeer to a more general fame, to become one of the favourite artists among art lovers, despite the apparent banality and sameness of his subjects. As mentioned earlier, this belated impact has led to assiduous attempts to explore the details of his life, together with a novel and film adding some fictional drama and romance to what appears to have been a rather uneventful life.<sup>9</sup> It appears, however, that the modern fascination with biographies of artists and writers does not work particularly well for Dutch seventeenth-century painters, or at least throws little light on their work.

In the later twentieth century a movement of almost crusading fervour attempted to overthrow conventional interpretations of Dutch paintings in the Golden Age through systematic exploration of their iconography. Previously there had been some attention to the narrative element in Dutch genre paintings, and there had been attempts to suggest that some subjects were distinctly less innocent than had usually been believed. However, the iconologists argued for a complete reinterpretation of Dutch art: it should no longer be understood as simple realism, but read for the underlying religious and moral messages expressed through symbols. This method brought closer attention to the composition of landscapes and genre in particular; a certain organization of landscape features, for example, should no longer be seen as a purely aesthetic choice but instead should be seen as conveying a particular message. This approach argued for a radically renewed interpretation of Dutch paintings by uncovering meanings which must have been obvious to contemporaries but had since been lost. Such indeed may have been the way – or one of the more important ways – that members of the educated elite in the Republic saw paintings, but it rather plays down the possibility that a broader public, while not being entirely unaware of the iconography, may have been more interested in the pictorial aspects of paintings. In part this stress on iconography was an attempt to understand how paintings were understood at the time, but at the expense of neglecting the importance of the realism in Dutch art – not to mention its purely aesthetic appeal.

So in the long term Dutch seventeenth-century painting had a powerful impact on European art, and Rembrandt and Vermeer loom large as figures with more than historical interest. Jacob Ruysdael, Frans Hals and perhaps Aelbert Cuyp also had, and have, a

resonance far beyond the borders of the Republic or the kingdom of the Netherlands. They have also become a part of the tourist kitsch, along with authentic windmills and unhistorical clogs, which is one of the few ways in which the Netherlands in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has made any impression on the rest of the world. Yet the tourist drawn to the Rijksmuseum, the Mauritshuis or the Boymans-Van Beuningen still comes into the presence of art which has an immediate attraction and also provides an insight into the past – and so the Golden Age lives on.

## II

# The Waning of the Golden Age

The Golden Age did not come to an abrupt or obvious end, any more than it had had a clear starting point. This is particularly true with regard to culture. It is possible to quantify the economic decline – though here too there is considerable debate as to its precise chronology – and the weakening of the Republic's international position can be measured to an extent through the fall in its naval and military capacity. It is less easy to judge the quality of literary or artistic production, and it is important to bear in mind that contemporaries were not aware of the decline that seems so obvious now. The question of decline is even more problematic in science: there are no figures of the stature of Christiaan Huygens, but the assimilation of the discoveries of the previous century allowed for the development of a more coherent picture of the nature and role of science in the eighteenth century. More broadly the transition to the Enlightenment can plausibly be regarded as in many ways a distinct advance in civilization, and belief in the possibility of progress an improvement on the worship of classical wisdom. Yet it is beyond serious dispute that the great cultural flowering of the seventeenth century did come to an end, and that Dutch culture in the eighteenth century was very different in important respects – and certainly less distinctive and innovative.

It had become evident well before the end of the seventeenth century that there were serious problems with the Dutch economy. The great boom was over by the middle of the century and, although this peak of prosperity held for a while, indications of structural problems began to emerge right across the board – in agriculture as well as manufactures and fishing, though trade more or less held its own, in volume at least. Painting seems to have followed a similar

pattern, with the great masters of the Dutch School dying by the 1670s – Rembrandt in 1669, Vermeer in 1675, Frans Hals in 1666, Jan Steen in 1679 and Jacob van Ruisdael in 1682. Cuyt lived till 1691 and Hobbema until the first decade of the eighteenth century but his work declined in both quantity and quality after his marriage in 1668 – though in *The Avenue of Trees at Middelharnis* (1689) he did produce one last great work. Many competent painters remained, but the great days were over. In literature it could be argued that the decline set in even earlier, disguised to some extent by the extreme longevity of Vondel and Constantijn Huygens. Again no major figures emerged to replace the masters of the literary Golden Age. In the early years of the century humanism had been at the heart of intellectual and spiritual life in the Republic, as it had been throughout Europe since the Renaissance, but the authority of the classics came increasingly under threat from discoveries which undermined ancient science. Also erudition was beginning to cut classical writers down to size, and philosophies were emerging which sought to render redundant earlier ways of understanding the world. Although these developments were far from negative, and in some ways can be considered a part of the Golden Age, they were weakening some of its chief intellectual structures. The Dutch humanists were replaced at the centre of European intellectual life by journals, published in the Republic but not disseminating specifically Dutch ideas; these periodicals were a service to the European intellectual community, bringing in ideas from all over the continent and redistributing them in a relatively digestible form. The Dutch were now more the servants of the intellectual culture of the time rather than its leaders.

Another way of understanding what the end of the Golden Age meant is to try to see what it had that the eighteenth century lacked. One important element was the unique nature of Dutch culture in its great years, both in its parts and in the way the parts came together to form a whole that clearly stood out from the European norm. This difference was most obvious in painting but, from the distinctive nature of Dutch humanism to the early rejection of prosecutions for witchcraft, the Dutch thought and acted in ways that were to a significant extent peculiar to themselves. There was a degree of conscious, and more often unconscious, innovation that was hard to find in the eighteenth-century Republic. The Dutch may have made

an important contribution to the early Enlightenment, but subsequently they were faithful followers of intellectual developments which originated elsewhere in Europe. Also much of the dynamic of Golden Age culture came from the tension between rapid change and the resistance to these changes. To some extent this was a clash of cultures, but the confrontation also proved fruitful. In contrast, the Enlightenment period in the Republic seems to have been characterized by a complacent conformity which was only seriously challenged in the last years of the eighteenth century. This is not to say that the aftermath of the Golden Age was merely barren, rather that it seems to have been chiefly concerned with assimilating the legacy of that turbulent period.

The idea of a decline in the eighteenth century is no longer as unchallenged as it used to be. This view first became current towards the end of the century itself as the Dutch saw the Republic proving itself pitifully weak in the Third Anglo-Dutch War (1780–84) and suffering major economic problems as well. The contrast with Dutch wealth and power in the seventeenth century became painfully obvious, and certainly from this point of view it was hard to avoid the sense of near-catastrophic decline. In cultural terms too the contrast between the modest achievement of the eighteenth with the literary and artistic achievements of the previous century had come to seem all too glaring. For a variety of reasons this denigratory view of the eighteenth century became the accepted orthodoxy throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. More recently there has been a strong revisionist movement among Dutch historians and this is beginning to produce a considerably more nuanced understanding of the period, rather than continuing to compare it unfavourably to the years of unquestioned Dutch greatness. The first major challenge was to the concept of economic decline and it was argued that the decline was relative rather than absolute, that is, that although the Republic did not keep up with its rivals, it nevertheless remained one of the more prosperous countries in Europe. Similar approaches have attempted, with greater or lesser success, to provide a rather more positive view of military and naval capacity and of the health of the political system. It is perhaps in cultural history that revisionism has produced the most interesting results. It remains rather difficult to get excited over the art produced after the end of the Golden Age:



the genre paintings of Cornelis Troost and the flower pieces of Rachel Ruysch are admirable in their way, but they are a decidedly meagre haul after the glories of the previous century. In literature, however, the spectatorial publications of the early years of the century and the birth of the Dutch novel towards its end are significant innovations, if based on foreign models, and in general Dutch prose writing became notably freer in style and more versatile than the rather turgid prose all too common in the previous century. Despite – or perhaps because of – its continuing link with rival interpretations of the nature of the Dutch polity, historical writing made notable advances, and in the multi-volume *Vaderlandsche Geschiedenis* of Jan Wagenaar it produced an undoubted masterpiece. A definitive break with the politics of the *ancien régime* was promised by the beginning of the Patriot movement in the last quarter of the century, though this should perhaps be regarded as a precursor of the following stage of Dutch history rather than as belonging to the eighteenth century proper.

The term that comes most readily to mind in respect of the intellectual and spiritual life of the Republic in the eighteenth century is civilized: it was not perhaps the most exciting place to live but it remained a notably tolerant society which kept up with the major enlightened trends in suitably moderate ways. This was not the Enlightenment of the French radicals, but rather a distinctly Christian Enlightenment seeking to reconcile religion with science, and progress with a decent regard for traditional values. If the religious temperature was rather tepid, and the attitude to tradition more than a little complacent, at least civility was able to triumph.

The century used to be referred to as the *Pruikentijd* (Periwig period) and seen as characterized by a complacent mediocrity, most notable perhaps in the inability to deal effectively with the fundamental problems which were beginning to hamstring the political system, but also applicable to a culture which regarded itself as having progressed beyond the crudities of the previous century. It is no longer adequate to understand the differences between Golden Age and eighteenth century in quite such stark and simplistic terms, but nevertheless the contrast in terms of culture remain incontrovertible if not as all-encompassing as was once thought. The transition was gradual and did not proceed at the same pace and at the same time in all

areas of culture, but nevertheless the signs of far-reaching change if not of evident decline were already obvious by the last quarter of the seventeenth century. Here the parallel with economic and social developments becomes too close to be ignored. There is an emerging consensus that the Dutch economy was faltering from, at the latest the 1660s (and the agricultural economy was already in some trouble by the mid-century). In retrospect it appears all too obvious that structural problems were beginning to affect all aspects of the economy: agricultural profits were falling, Dutch manufactures were losing foreign markets, and there was increasing concern that something was going badly wrong with the VOC (the WIC having already collapsed in 1672). Such problems were changing the social context of Dutch culture. This was above all an urban culture yet de-urbanization was well under way in parts of Holland before the end of the seventeenth century: the centres of cloth manufacture, Leiden and Haarlem, were at the beginning of a population decline that would become well-nigh catastrophic by the second half of the following century, and the Zuider Zee port Enkhuizen seems to have been losing population since the 1620s. The pattern emerging was that only Amsterdam and Rotterdam would more or less hold their numbers while all the other towns of Holland would decline to a greater or a lesser extent. Similarly the varied economy of the countryside of North Holland was starting a process which would leave it almost exclusively agricultural by the middle of the eighteenth century. So the urban balance was changing in favour of the two leading towns – and the political and administrative centre, The Hague – and the relationship between town and countryside was also changing, smoothing away some of the characteristics which had made Holland so different at the peak of its prosperity.

As the economy faltered unemployment rose, especially in the manufacturing centres, and poor relief became an ever more serious problem. At the other end of the social scale the regents withdrew from direct involvement in trade and manufactures and became increasingly dependent on the profits of office and the income from secure investments. Many of the wealthy too retreated from risky economic activities in favour of lending to the Generality or Holland or investing in the shares of the VOC. As entrepreneurial activities became more risky and perhaps less profitable, those with capital began to prefer safer though less potentially lucrative destinations for

their money. It seems that throughout the economy holding on to what one had took precedence over the sort of entrepreneurial daring which had helped to fuel the economic boom of the Golden Age. As people closed ranks, it became more difficult for outsiders to join craft guilds and members of the various religious groups turned more and more to their own organizations for help rather than relying on overstretched civic charity. It has even been suggested that sectarian endogamy increased and that the roots of the later *verzuiling* could be found in the late seventeenth century as society came under increasing economic stress.<sup>1</sup> A society increasingly averse to risk was likely to produce rather different cultural expressions than one in the grip of rapid economic growth with its attendant dangers as well as opportunities.

The result seems to have been a culture that was less self-confident and even more conditioned to imitate foreign models than that of the Golden Age, with its reverence for classical culture. Already in 1669 the society *Nil volentibus arduum* had been founded in Amsterdam by a group of influential – or would-be influential – writers with the aim of promoting the observance of the rules of French classicism in Dutch literature, and the vigour of the previous generation of authors began to be regarded as crude rather than powerful. A new conformism based largely on foreign examples set in, inspired in part by the interpretation of the rules for classical literature put forward by Dutch humanists earlier in the century. Similarly in art Rembrandt lost critical ground as smoother and more polished styles came into favour following French and Italian examples, and as Pieter de Hooch moved from Delft to Amsterdam so his simple interiors were replaced by more elaborate celebrations of the life of the wealthy. The increasingly rich clothing of the subjects of portraits may or may not reflect a significant change in the way people dressed in fact, but it certainly points to a change in the way they wanted to appear – burgher propriety and simplicity was no longer the dominant mode. So the art and literature of surrounding aristocratic countries became more and more influential in a society which had always been vulnerable to the claims of the culture which dominated the rest of Europe. The economic uncertainty of the later years of the seventeenth century played a major part in undermining what turned out to be a rather fragile cultural independence.

The descent from the vigour of the Golden Age to the comfortable mediocrity of the eighteenth century cannot be properly understood unless it is seen in a much broader perspective. Looking at the history of the Low Countries throughout the early modern period can help to see the significance of longer-term processes rather than concentrating on the simplistic and often emotionally-loaded idea of greatness and decline. The end of the Burgundian culture in the Netherlands in the fifteenth century was celebrated in the classic work by Huizinga,<sup>2</sup> *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, and in its place a more urban-based culture was emerging in the later years of the century, stimulated by the impact of the Renaissance. This blend of a new urban culture and humanism shaped the developments in literature, in Latin at first as well as Dutch and French, in the sixteenth century. At the same time the Low Countries had become second only to Italy as a centre of Renaissance art. From Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden in the early fifteenth century through Hieronymus Bosch to Pieter Bruegel in the sixteenth a powerful artistic tradition flourished without which the Dutch School of the Golden Age could never have come into existence. This was also the great age of Netherlands polyphony in music, though this had a much less positive influence on later Dutch culture, partly because of the decline of church music after the triumph of the Reformed Church. The Reformation was second only in importance to the Renaissance in its impact on the general culture of the Netherlands, and its influence on attitudes to the church and religion was profound though disruptive.

The northern provinces of the Low Countries had tended to play second fiddle to Flanders and Brabant up to this point, and to a significant extent the Dutch cultural achievements of the seventeenth century can be seen as an acceleration of the developments which were already taking place in the Low Countries in the previous century. This is clearly the case with regard to humanism where generations of leading scholars, including Erasmus and Lipsius, made the Netherlands one of the great centres of classical learning in sixteenth-century Europe, and this tradition was carried on in the Golden Age by Grotius, Vossius, Heinsius and the imported Salmasius. The Dutch debt to the broader Netherlands tradition is even more undeniable with regard to painting, both in terms of stylistic influences and through the even more direct cause of artists moving to the

Republic and giving a kick-start to the Dutch School. In general the Golden Age picked up and intensified the profound cultural changes that were already taking place in the Low Countries, but it also added new and distinctive elements, such as the religious pluralism which was the fruit of a tolerant intellectual climate and which in turn partly stemmed from the idealistic tradition of Erasmus but also from a pragmatism that was quintessentially Dutch. In its final decades the tumultuous changes of the seventeenth century started to slow down and also to fit rather more smoothly with the dominant cultural strands in the rest of Europe than had previously been the case. In this context the eighteenth century 'decline' can be seen as a period of consolidation and assimilation after the increasingly rapid cultural changes of the previous two centuries.

It is worth noting that the rhythm of cultural change and development fits in rather well with long-term economic developments. From the late fifteenth century onwards the Low Countries saw rapid economic growth and expansion, with Antwerp becoming the major trading centre of northern Europe. The onset of the Revolt brought this expansion to a temporary halt, but before the end of the sixteenth century growth had resumed in the North with even greater vigour while the South slipped behind. By the late seventeenth century this general economic boom was over, and the following century was characterized by attempts to preserve the gains which had been made rather than to expand further, let alone innovate with all the risks inevitably involved. Economically as well as culturally the Dutch had pulled in their horns and were looking for a quiet life.

The glories of the Golden Age left an ambivalent legacy for the Dutch. On the one hand they could be proud of a period when they were a major force in European, indeed world, history; on the other, nothing in their later history could even start to match the achievements of the past. There were also aspects of the Golden Age that were problematic for important sections of the Dutch population. While there was a general appreciation of the literature and art of the period, and an almost as general appreciation of the burgher culture which was felt to be one of its great virtues, both Catholics and socialists found it difficult to derive inspiration for their political and cultural goals from the Golden Age. For the Catholics during their struggle for emancipation in the nineteenth century, and to some

extent even later as well, the problem was that they found it difficult to identify with a Revolt which was interpreted as a triumph for Protestantism, let alone with the Republic where, despite the much vaunted toleration of the new state, the public exercise of their religion was banned and they were excluded from political and public office at every level of society. As long as *verzuiling* continued Catholics were likely to have a distinctive view of the Dutch past in general, and their appreciation of the culture of the Golden Age in particular was likely to be partial at best. They could look back with sectarian pride to the Catholic convert Vondel as the greatest poet and playwright of the period, and they could also claim that a number of the leading painters were Catholic, but otherwise the aggressively Protestant nature of much of the culture of the period was somewhat hard to swallow. For the socialist movement the problem was different as they could find little in the period to provide specific encouragement for their political and cultural crusade; after all, the triumph of bourgeois capitalism was a stage of history which had to be overcome, not celebrated. In addition they were no more attracted to a Protestant interpretation of Dutch history than were the Catholics: in the politics of the Netherlands in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, the Protestant parties were consistently right-wing opponents of the socialist and labour movements, and so the latter clung to a different eschatology looking to a glorious future rather than a glorious past.

The rise of nationalism in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provided another reason for the Dutch to view the Golden Age with mixed feelings. Whatever the achievements of the period, an awareness of the existence and pre-eminent importance of the Dutch nation was lacking. Politically the Republic had been a marriage of convenience between the northern provinces of the Low Countries, and only over time did a sense of supra-provincial loyalty to the new state begin to develop. This was anathema to nineteenth-century nationalists for whom the nation was an almost mystical ideal rather than an historical reality; for them the Republic was the political expression of a pre-existing Dutch nation, and the failure of the institutions of the state to recognize this was an almost fatal flaw. In particular the insistence of Holland on pursuing its own interests was seen as little short of treason, and the regents of the

province were cast as the representatives of the evils of provincial particularism, while the princes of Orange were seen as the champions of the interests of the Dutch nation. Perhaps even more galling was the failure of seventeenth-century culture to exhibit that pious glorification of the nation that was such a characteristic of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in its first century of existence. The Batavian myth may have provided the possibility of a common historical origin for the Dutch people, but it also fell victim to intense provincial rivalry over its ownership. Both Holland and Gelderland claimed to have been the home of the Batavians, and so sought to incorporate them into their own histories rather than that of the Republic as a whole. If nations are indeed imagined communities then the fundamental problem for the nationalists was that the culture of the Golden Age imagined the Dutch nation only very imperfectly.

One of the more intriguing aspects of the changes over time in Dutch attitudes towards, and understanding of, their Golden Age is an oscillation between stressing the unique elements in the culture of that time and arguing that it remained essentially a part of a broader European civilization. Both approaches are partially valid, of course, but it seems that the message of the Golden Age was heard in different ways at different times. In the eighteenth century, as the Dutch came increasingly to see themselves as in decline – culturally, politically and economically – they looked to the previous century as a guide to what had gone wrong and how to fix it. What they came to focus on as the key to past success were the burgher qualities of simplicity of manners and hard work which they believed had brought the country to greatness. As a result they believed that the way out of decline had to be sought primarily in a cultural reformation which would restore the true character of the Dutch people. Seen from this point of view the essence of the Golden Age was a set of unique characteristics which had set off the Dutch from the aristocratic culture of most of Europe. Wealth had encouraged luxury and the importation of foreign manners, and this had corrupted the national character and brought on general decline. Attitudes changed with the setting up of the kingdom of the Netherlands in 1814: a centralized monarchical state was a considerable contrast to the political system of the Republic, and the legitimacy of the new regime

demanding criticism of the old, and not just as regards its political structure. The issue was further confused as initially the new monarchy included all of the Low Countries (in the hope of providing a stronger check on potential French aggression); clearly the new state could not lean too heavily on the legacy of the Republic if it was to unite both halves of the Netherlands. This uneasy union was short-lived, however, and was ended by the Belgian break-away of 1830; the kingdom of the Netherlands was now straightforwardly the heir to the Republic and needed to appropriate that legacy to its own ends.

The loss of Belgium meant the end of attempts to create a common Netherlands identity looking back to the Burgundian and Habsburg period before the Revolt split the Low Countries. Now both the kingdom of the Netherlands and Belgium sought to see the division as an inevitable result of incompatible differences in national character. For the Dutch this meant arguing that the very different outcomes of the Revolt for the North and the South of the Low Countries demonstrated that the incompatibility evident in 1830 already existed in the sixteenth century. This attitude approached what Pieter Geyl later disparagingly called the Little Netherlands view of Dutch history, which strove to prove that the northern provinces of the Netherlands had always had a common identity separate from that of the South. Of course this also meant that the cultural achievements of the Golden Age could be, and indeed had to be, claimed as an expression of this distinct identity. Demonstrating the cultural rift between the Republic and the Spanish Netherlands also implied that there had been a more general cultural division between the Republic and the rest of Europe. In consequence after 1830 the dominant approach was to celebrate the achievements of the seventeenth century as an expression of fundamental and distinctive Dutch values. However, basing national identity on the example of the Golden Age caused some problems: the regent regime with its principled opposition to monarchy and its tendency to put province before country was anathema to supporters of the centralized Orange monarchy. Also both Reformation and Revolt became controversial as the movement for Catholic emancipation grew more powerful both politically and culturally; identification with the culture of the Golden Age was not so self-evident for



the substantial Catholic section of the Dutch population. Still, Dutch painting was far less obtrusively Protestant than many aspects of seventeenth-century culture, and the foundation of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam made a treasure-house of art accessible to the population regardless of political or religious affiliation.

By the beginning of the twentieth century the rise of socialism with its sense of loyalty to the international workers' movement, the increasing economic importance of the Dutch East Indies, and the growth of Flemish nationalism began to provide a challenge to what had come to seem a somewhat insular culture. In particular sympathy for the perceived plight of their fellow Dutch speakers in Belgium encouraged a rethinking of the political and cultural division of the Low Countries which had seemed so self-evident to a previous generation. In the interwar years this interest in the common cultural heritage of the whole of the Netherlands encouraged a reinterpretation of the key moments in Dutch history. It could now be argued that the split between North and South which resulted from the Revolt of the Netherlands had not been the inevitable result of inherent differences but of the accidents of politics and war. Such interpretations seemed to require at the very least a revised understanding of the culture of the Golden Age. However, by the 1930s the increasingly threatening atmosphere in Europe, together with the taint of racism, weakened support in the Netherlands for such ideas. Johan Huizinga, whose earlier *Waning of the Middle Ages* had been a paean to the splendour of the culture of the Burgundian Netherlands, now turned to the Golden Age as the embodiment of fundamental Dutch values in face of the threat of fascism and particularly of Nazism. His short book – he subtitled it 'a sketch'<sup>3</sup> – can be seen to a significant extent as an commentary on the situation facing the Netherlands at the time of writing. Throughout he was concerned to stress the individual nature of Dutch civilization, with its republican political institutions standing out in a Europe of absolutist monarchies, and its culture a similar contrast to the Baroque which dominated the rest of Europe.

The Netherlands emerged from the Second World War, with its bitter experience of defeat and occupation, ready to support movements for European integration with an enthusiasm fired by a determination to prevent another war in Europe. The Dutch were

perhaps the most committed supporters of the Common Market and then the European Union, and partly as a result of this European and international orientation, Dutch historians started to re-evaluate the role of the Netherlands in European history. Even the Golden Age began to lose some of its distinctive character when placed under this unforgiving scholarly scrutiny. This revisionism was concerned in the first place to produce a sort of Benelux history, that is, a history that would try to present the history of the whole of the Low Countries as a unity. This led to the multi-volumed collaborative *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* (General History of the Netherlands) published in 1949, and to a later and more lavishly produced version of the same title which began publication in 1977. However appropriate this format may have been for the Middle Ages and perhaps even for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it proved far from satisfactory for the period of the Dutch Republic. The sections dealing with the seventeenth century in the first set found few unifying themes between the Republic and the Spanish Netherlands, and the later more ambitious attempt did little better. For the Golden Age at least this attempt to subsume Dutch history into a greater Netherlands whole was neither coherent nor convincing. However, a new approach to the study of Dutch painting in the Golden Age produced a series of revisionist interpretations which pulled Dutch art much closer to the European mainstream than had previously seemed possible. Specialists in iconography began to show that paintings which were apparently simple landscapes or genre pieces in fact contained sometimes quite elaborate moral or spiritual messages. It seemed that the Dutch School could no longer be defined by its realism alone and, although the more extreme claims of the iconographers have largely been rejected, the art of the Golden Age can no longer be understood in quite the simplistic way it was before these revelations. If the reinterpretation of seventeenth-century art was the most striking aspect of the revisionism of the post-war years, the culture of the Golden Age more generally began to be presented as having more in common with that of the rest of Europe than Huizinga, for example, would have allowed. It can be said that to a considerable extent the drive towards European integration in the post-war period ran parallel to attempts to integrate the Golden Age into seventeenth-century Europe.

More recently the enthusiasm in the Netherlands for the European project has weakened, and at the same time immigration has become a major political and social issue. One result of these changes has been a fear that Dutch identity could be subsumed by Europe or swamped by immigrants. Already there are unmistakeable signs of a renewed interest, not least on the part of government, in what was distinctive in Dutch history, and it would be surprising if this did not lead to a backlash as far as interpretations of the Golden Age are concerned. The search for Dutch identity is likely to stimulate renewed interest how the Dutch differed from the rest of Europe in the Golden Age.

The legacy of the Golden Age outside the Netherlands has been very different and much more narrowly focused. Interest in Dutch painting had grown steadily over the centuries but awareness of its historical context has always been weak, and Dutch culture apart from art has been more or less a blank page as far as the rest of the world is concerned. The history of science has brought some attention to Simon Stevin, Christiaan Huyghens and Leeuwenhoek, and Grotius has always been a figure to conjure with in the history of international law, but the literature of the period has never made an impact outside the Low Countries. (There was considerable contemporary interest in Germany, but it does not seem to have lasted beyond the end of the seventeenth century.) In some specialized fields the contribution of Dutch writers and thinkers is still remembered to some extent: Gerard Noodt, for example, has a respected place in the history of Roman Law, and the pioneering work of Dutch scholars in biblical hermeneutics has not been entirely forgotten, though it tends to be overshadowed by the fame of the French scholar, Richard Simon, later in the seventeenth century. The achievements of the great generation of Dutch humanists brought them European fame in their own time but have largely been forgotten since. In contrast, two outsiders in Dutch society have enjoyed a more lasting reputation: Spinoza, infamous for his supposed atheism in his own time but little understood, has since been recognized as one of the great philosophers of modern times; and Pierre Bayle, whose sceptical intelligence was both admired and reviled during his lifetime, is regarded as an important forerunner of the Enlightenment and so has a secure place in intellectual history. The

renegade Jew and the French refugee found in the Republic the conditions which allowed them to develop and express – with distinct limits in the former's case – their ideas. Spinoza found crucial support among Dutch radicals who saw to the publication of his complete works after his death, and Bayle benefited from the possibilities offered by Dutch publishing. Their more lasting fame is thus not an entirely inaccurate reflection of the intellectual culture of the Golden Age.

In the case of painting the focus of attention outside the Netherlands has been greater and more consistent but has tended to be rather narrow in its scope, and seems to be becoming more so, with Rembrandt and now Vermeer figuring more and more prominently. Perhaps this has been the major change over time: while Rembrandt has always been regarded as a major artist, Vermeer was lost in the ranks of the genre painters until the late nineteenth century when his unique qualities were finally recognized. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries foreign connoisseurs had considerable interest in the leading Dutch landscapists – Cuyp seems to have been particularly popular in Britain – and in meticulously painted genre pieces, and the great European art collections show evidence of considerable interest in a wide variety of Dutch seventeenth-century painting. More recently, however, popular awareness has seemed to focus on only a handful of artists, although art historians have shown an unflagging interest into even the most obscure aspects of the Dutch School. Both Rembrandt and Vermeer have been the subject of English-language films, neither of them particularly enlightening from an artistic point of view, but few others seem likely to attract this sort of interest. Nevertheless it is generally accepted that Dutch seventeenth-century painting made a unique contribution to the development of art in Europe and in doing so left an incomparable pictorial legacy of the Golden Age.

The Dutch Republic's period as a major power quickly faded, and by the nineteenth century the Netherlands could take its place, alongside Sweden and Spain, as a small power with a great past. In the Dutch case, however, there were particular features of their history which continued to have a certain resonance. The Revolt remained an inspiring example in many ways: as a significant blow for free-dom against absolutism, as a triumph of Protestantism over Catholic

repression, or as as a national uprising against foreign oppression. In the Enlightenment Goethe's play *Egmont* bore witness to this continued interest, and in the nineteenth century Motley's voluminous studies of the rise of the Dutch Republic depicted the Revolt and the Eighty Years War as an epic struggle against political and religious tyranny.<sup>4</sup> This interest continued into the twentieth century and, while the treatment has been progressively less romantic and celebratory, the Revolt has still been seen as an important phase in European history. The achievements of the Republic have also continued to be recognized, though over time the cultural have tended to overshadow the economic and political, let alone the colonial aspects of the Golden Age.

There are certain aspects of the Dutch experience in the Revolt and Golden Age which might be considered to be still relevant in more than the rather general sense in which all history is relevant. In the first place it is a sharp reminder of the possible fertility of cultures even if they have to operate from a relatively limited political and demographic base. Also in the present uncertainties and apprehensions concerning the European Union it provides evidence for the belief that national and local cultures – in the broadest sense – have the capacity for considerably greater resilience than the pessimists give them credit for. Lively cultures, open to fruitful interplay with ideas and influence from outside, are wellplaced to resist assimilation; defensive and in-turned cultures far less so.

One way of assessing the nature and scope of the achievements of the Golden Age is through a comparison of the northern Netherlands in the middle of the sixteenth century with the Republic at a similar point in the eighteenth. The economic transformation of the region was already under way by 1550 and had slowed to a virtual stop by 1750, leaving the country as an almost perfect example of commercial capitalism. This outcome seems a predictable from the economic and social trends already evident in the early sixteenth century. What was much less predictable was the change from a society riven by the presence and the persecution of religious dissidents to the far-reaching religious pluralism which characterized the eighteenth-century Republic. Historians have not been slow to point out the limitations on Dutch religious toleration; they should be equally prepared to recognize the progress that had been made. Here the contrast with

the Southern Netherlands is instructive: from a similar starting point the latter became a showcase for Counter-Reformation Catholicism with its own very effective form of intolerance.

The cultural continuities over the period as a whole are clear, though the Golden Age brought about such a degree of intensification in some areas as to break through to something almost unprecedented. The pictorial realism of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Flemish art was the foundation on which the Dutch School was built, but the latter largely purged such realism of extraneous elements to produce a purer vision. Throughout the early modern period the northern Netherlands was also a relatively open society, absorbing cultural influences such as the Renaissance and Reformation from outside, assimilating them, and then re-exporting them in sometimes significantly modified forms. The Low Countries responded strongly to the Renaissance, and in turn the Republic became the centre from which humanist influences spread throughout northern Europe. In the later seventeenth century the Dutch played a major role in the transition between the world of humanism and the Enlightenment, drawing in ideas from all over Europe and distributing them by means of learned periodicals. Similarly, the Low Countries were receptive, despite official persecution, to a variety of Protestant influences, first from Germany then Geneva via France. Later the Republic proved even more open to movements within Protestantism, from Puritan tracts to German Pietism, and became a refuge for individuals and sects that were persecuted elsewhere. This is a reminder that one of the continuities of Netherlands history in this period was a powerful strand of thought favouring religious toleration, for principled as well as pragmatic reasons, stretching from Erasmus through Coornhert and Grotius to Jean Le Clerc (not to mention Spinoza). This tradition was snuffed out in the Spanish Netherlands as a result of persecution and emigration in the late sixteenth century, but gained strength in the North and carried through to the end of the Republic.

Perhaps the most powerful and persistent continuity was the prominence of the visual or pictorial in the culture of the Low Countries from Van Eyck in the fifteenth century to *De Stijl* in the twentieth. Here at least during the Dutch Golden Age there was something of a history common to both North and South largely

unhampered by ideology: in the age of Rembrandt, Rubens shone more brightly as far as the conventional judgement of the time was concerned, but the former has more than made up for that in later centuries. Indeed, although the achievements of the Dutch Golden Age that most surprised and impressed contemporaries were the economic success and rapid rise to major power status, together with respect in certain quarters for its great contribution to humanism, ever since it has been the art of the period which has made the greatest impression. Moreover, unlike military or naval success, and unlike a prosperity which has long faded, Dutch paintings are still here to be experienced first hand. This piece of Dutch history still lives and is still capable of giving pleasure, though we can never be sure that what we see and experience now is either what the artist intended or what contemporaries perceived.





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# INDEX

- Académie des Sciences 171  
 Aitzema, Lieuwe van 149–50  
 Albany 225  
*Algemene Geshiedenis der Nederlanden*  
     256  
 Alkmaar 25  
 Alva, duke of 188  
 Amboina massacre (1623) 37  
 Amsterdam 15, 16, 24, 26, 32, 45,  
     48, 57, 91, 100, 145–6, 176,  
     227, 248  
     Athenaum 156  
     painting in 123  
     Schouwburg 142, 146  
 Anglo-Dutch Wars 14  
 Antwerp 16, 31, 33, 45  
     Treaty of 201, 218  
 apocalyptic beliefs 37  
 Aquinas, Thomas 197  
 architecture, vernacular 228–9  
 Avercamp, Hendrick 127  
  
 Banda islands 37  
 Batavia 178, 223  
 Bayle, Pierre 33, 77, 161, 162, 199,  
     257–8  
  
     *Nouvelles de la République des*  
     *Lettres* 161, 199  
 Beck, David 33  
 Bekker, Balthasar 60, 62, 193  
 Belgium 254  
 Berckheyde, Gerrit 128, 237  
     *Market Place and Town Hall,*  
     *Haarlem* 93  
 Beuningen, Coenraad van 183  
 Beverwijk 225  
 Beverwijk, Johan van 96  
     *On the Excellence of the Female*  
     *Sex* (1639) 96  
 biblical hermeneutics 158–9,  
     164, 257  
 Blaeu, Willem Jansz. 178  
 Bol, Ferdinand 132  
 Bor, Pieter 149  
 Borch, Gerard ter 238  
 Bosch, Hieronymus 250  
 Bourignon, Antoinette 73, 183,  
     194  
 Brabant 10, 44  
     North Brabant 26, 40, 41, 52,  
     101  
 Brandt, Gerard 150, 214

- Brazil 224  
 Breda 220  
 Bredero, Gerbrant Adriaensz.  
     138, 141, 144  
 Bruegel, Pieter 216  
 Bruges 45  
 Bruggen, Hendrick ter 122  
 Buchell, Arnout van 64–5  
  
 Camphuysen, Dirk Raphaelsz.  
     143–4  
 Cape of Good Hope 178  
 Capelle, Jan van de 112  
     *River Scene with Large Ferry* 20  
 Catholic Church 38, 40–41, 46,  
     79, 195–6  
 Catholic mission 40, 89  
     *klopjes* 96–7, 195  
 Catholic emancipation 251–2  
 Cats, Jacob 135, 141, 142, 143  
 censorship 69–70, 71–2, 74–5  
 chronicles 149–50  
 Claesz., Pieter  
     *Still Life with Drinking Vessels* 124  
 Clerc, Jean Le 38, 61, 182, 233,  
     260  
     *Bibliothèque universelle et his-  
     torique* 161  
 Cocceius, Johannes 61, 190  
 Coehoorn, Menno van 176, 221  
 Collegiants 73, 193–4  
 Coornhert, Dirk Volckertsz. 38,  
     192, 228, 260  
 Court, Johan de la 209–10  
 Court, Pieter de la 209–10  
 culture, women in 93–9  
 cultural change 60–62, 77–8,  
     164–5, 250–51, 259  
     cultural decline 244–5  
     cultural divisions 51–2, 54, 62–5,  
         68–9, 84, 166–7, 169–70  
 Cuyp, Aelbert III, 118, 243, 245,  
     258  
     *The Large Dordt* 48  
  
 Delft 25  
     painting in 122  
     demography 30–31  
 Den Briel 47  
 De Rijk 22, 51  
*De Stijl* 260  
 Descartes, René 41, 61, 77, 83,  
     170, 171, 198  
 Deventer 217  
 Dordrecht 25  
 Dordt, synod of 79, 186, 187, 205,  
     206  
 Dou, Gerrit III, 239  
 Dunkirk 30  
 Dutch language 10, 139–40, 143,  
     147–8  
     *Staaten-Bijbel* 147  
 Dutch Revolt 9, 10, 254  
  
 economy 14–20, 44, 259  
     agriculture 16, 49–51, 100  
     decline 244, 246, 248–9  
     fisheries 16–17  
     merchant marine 29–30  
     shipbuilding 17, 226–7  
     textiles 17–18  
 education 65–6, 138–9  
 Eighty Years War 9, 13, 15, 34, 52,  
     82, 175, 218–19, 221  
 emblem books 143  
 England 13–14, 40

- Enkhuizen 17, 25–6, 248
- Enlightenment 102, 171, 244,  
246, 247
- Episcopius, Simon 38, 192, 228,  
233
- Erasmus, Desiderius 38, 154–5,  
191, 228, 260
- European Union 256, 259
- Eyck, Jan van 216, 250
- Fabritius, Carel 122
- Fairfax, Sir Thomas 221
- Flanders 10, 44
- Flemish School 216, 260
- foreign policy 80–82
- France 13, 35, 82
- French invasion (1672) 14, 176,  
213  
tariffs of 1668 35
- Franecker 48  
university 155
- Fries language 10
- Friesland 11, 23, 52
- Furly, Benjamin 76
- Gelderland 10, 11, 52
- Geyl, Pieter 254
- Ghent 45  
Pacification of 205
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von  
259
- Gouda 25
- Goyen, Jan van 111, 18
- Graft 51
- Groningen (province) 11, 23
- Groningen, university of 155
- Grotius, Hugo 57, 64, 143, 149,  
152, 156–8, 157, 192, 208,  
228, 257, 260  
*De antiquitate reipublicae  
Batavicae* 203  
*De jure belli ac pacis* 208  
group portraits 76
- Haan, Galenus Abrahamsz. de 73
- Haarlem 17, 24–5, 48, 248  
painting in 122
- Habsburg Netherlands 9, 10
- Hague, The 25, 26, 53, 248
- Hals, Frans 103, 105, 119–20,  
243, 245  
*The Regents of the Old Men's  
Almshouse, Haarlem* 96  
*The Regentesses of the Old Men's  
Almshouse* 96, 97
- Harderwijk 155
- Heidelberg, university of 231–2
- Heinsius, Daniel 135, 142, 229,  
230
- Henri III of France 10
- Henri IV of France 218
- Hertogenbosch ('s-) 220
- Heyden, Jan van der 128  
*The Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal and  
the Oude Haarlemmersluis,  
Amsterdam* 47
- historical writings 148–51
- Hobbema, Meindert 118, 245  
*Haarlem Lock, Amsterdam* 50
- Holland 10, 11, 15, 22–3, 43,  
44–5
- Holland, States of 12, 75  
rural sector 49–51  
towns 24–5, 30, 32, 45–6,  
47–9, 75–6, 91–2  
urban architecture 92

- Holy Roman Empire 9–10, 216  
*Hoge Raad* 56, 58  
 Honthorst, Gerrit 105, 122  
 Hooch, Pieter de 120, 123, 249  
     *Courtyard of a House in Delft* 94  
 Hooft, C. P. 86  
 Hooft, Pieter Cornelisz. 85, 86, 140, 141, 143, 149, 152  
 Hooker, Richard, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* 232  
 Hoorn 17, 25, 227  
 Hotham, Sir John 221  
 Hotman, François 201  
 Houbraken, Arnold 110  
 Huber, Ulrich 214  
 Huis ten Bosch 105  
 Huizinga, Johan 216, 255  
 humanism 85–6, 162–3, 228–30, 250  
     and art 123–5  
 Huygens, Christiaan 61, 168, 172, 178, 180, 182–3, 244, 257  
 Huygens, Constantijn 132, 140, 141, 144, 182, 182, 245  
  
 immigration 31–3, 99–100, 145–6, 257  
 Israel, Manasseh ben 194  
  
 Janssonius, Joannes, 'Map of the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands' 18–19  
 Japan 223–4  
 Java 223  
 Jews 31, 194  
 Jordaens, Jacob 105  
  
 Kampen 217  
 Koerbagh, Adriaan 193  
 Koninck, Philip, *An Extensive Landscape with a Road by a River* 21  
  
 Labadie, Jean de 73  
 land drainage schemes 20–24, 226  
 land provinces 43, 52–4  
 Lastman, Pieter 114, 131, 241  
     *Juno Discovering Jupiter and Io* 109  
 learned journals 159–61, 245  
 Leeuwenhoek, Anthonie 61, 168, 181–2, 181, 257  
 legal theory  
     and politics 207–8  
 Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm 199  
 Leicester, earl of 9–10, 205  
 Leiden 17, 24, 48, 91, 248  
     painting in 122  
     siege of 175, 220  
     university 155, 156, 175, 229  
 Leyster, Judith, *The Merry Drinker* 98  
  
 Lievens, Jan 132  
 Lely, Sir Peter 237  
 Limborch, Philip van 61, 233  
 Lipsius, Justus 154–5, 212, 228–9  
 Locke, John 235  
     *Letter on Toleration* 231  
 Louis XIV of France 14, 36  
  
 Maastricht 220  
 Maes, Nicholaes 238  
 magical universe 90  
 Mander, Karel van 107, 110

- Het schilder-boeck* 107
- Medemblick 47
- Menonites 39, 41, 72–3, 87, 89,  
192
- Meteren, Emmanuel van 149
- Metsu, Gabriël III, 238  
    *Man Writing a Letter* 112  
    *Woman Reading a Letter* 113
- Mieris, Frans van III
- Moluccas 37
- Monnickendam 47
- Motley, J. L. 259
- Münster, treaty of (1648) 13,  
197, 201
- nadere reformatie* 89, 190–91
- Nantes, Edict of, Revocation  
(1685) 31, 40, 81, 161
- national identity 101–2, 253–4,  
254–5, 257
- nationalism 252–3
- Neer, Aert van der 127  
    *A Landscape with a River at  
    Evening* 22
- Netherlands, kingdom of 253–4
- New Netherland 32–3, 224–5
- Nieuwpoort, battle of 175, 219
- Nil volentibus arduum* 249
- nobility 51, 54
- Nonsuch, treaty of (1585) 10
- Noodt, Gerard 257
- Occupation, German 255–6
- Oldenbarnevelt, Johan van 12,  
81, 187, 202, 204–5
- Opitz, Martin 230–31
- Orange, princes of 12, 74, 210–11  
    Frederik Hendrik 12, 105,  
176, 219, 220
- Maurits 12, 175, 176, 219  
    Willem II 12, 176  
    Willem III 12, 36, 81, 212,  
213, 214, 235
- Ostend, siege of 220, 221
- Over-Betuwe 53
- Overijssel II, 52
- pamphlets 73–4, 134, 209  
    supporting Revolt 201–2  
    in 1672 212–3
- painting 107, 109–10, 126–7,  
131–3, 135–7, 261  
    Dutch School 103–4, 108–9,  
237–42  
    export 136, 236–7  
    genre 125, 238, 239  
    iconography 242, 256  
    influence of ‘Flemish’ art  
107, 119, 250–51  
    landscape 127–8, 239, 241  
    market for art 104–6, 125–6  
    seascape 129–30  
    townscape 128, 241  
    volume of production 104,  
236
- Perizonius, Jacobus 199
- philosophy 198–200
- Poelenburg, Cornelis van, *Women  
    Bathing in a Landscape* 110
- poetry 142, 143–4, 145
- Poland-Lithuania 216
- poor relief 77, 88
- Post, Frans 224
- printing 133–4
- prints 134–5  
    *Pruikentijd* 247–8

- publishing 71–2, 73, 147, 229  
Purmerend 47
- raadpensionaris* 74, 75, 141
- Rabus, Pieter 74, 161–2  
*Boekzaal van Europe* 74, 161
- Reformation 151–2
- Reformed Church 39–40, 46, 51,  
71, 80, 83, 86–7, 89,  
186–90, 196, 202, 231–3  
councils 76  
ministers 71  
social ethic 87–8  
theology 185–6, 231  
and politics 204–6  
and witchcraft 55, 56–7
- regents 35, 40, 79, 187–8
- religious pluralism 37–8, 79–80,  
101, 185, 192–3, 196–8, 235
- Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn  
83, 103, 112–17, 123, 134, 237,  
240, 241, 245, 249, 258, 261  
*Self Portrait*, 1669 114  
*The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor*  
*Nicolaes Tulp* 116  
*Woman Bathing in a Stream* 115
- Remonstrants 41, 72, 187, 188,  
189, 191–2, 204
- Renaissance 84, 139, 151–2,  
216–7, 228, 230–31
- Republic of Letters 159–60
- Rijnsburg 193
- Ripa, Cesare 118
- Rotterdam 24, 48, 70, 76, 248  
Illustrious School 161
- Royal Society 171
- Rubens, Pieter Paul 238, 261
- Ruisdael, Jacob van 103, 111, 118,  
245  
*Landscape with a Ruined Castle*  
*and Church* 119
- Ruysch, Rachel 247
- Ruysdael, Salomon van, *View of*  
*Deventer* 49
- Salmasius, Claudius 63–4, 158,  
229
- Saenredam, Pieter 92, 128  
*Interior of the Buurkerk, Utrecht*  
129
- Scaliger, Joseph Justus 229
- Schoonhoven 47
- Schurman, Anna Maria van 98
- science, rise of 89–91, 163–4,  
168–71, 178–81  
no academy of sciences  
172–4  
overseas expansion and sci-  
ence 177–8  
war and science 174–7
- secularization 77–82
- Secundus, Janus 143
- Sevi, Sabbatai 194
- Simon, Richard 257
- Skippon, Philip 221
- Socinians 186, 193
- Solms, Amalia von 132
- Spinoza, Baruch 41, 62, 77, 83,  
193, 194, 198–200, 209,  
257–8, 260  
*Theological-Political Treatise*  
211–12  
*Political Treatise* 212
- Sri Lanka 223
- Stadhouder* 12
- States General 11, 75

- Steen, Jan 103, 120, 126, 238, 245  
*The young ones chirrup as the old ones sing* 121
- Stevin, Simon 168, 175, 176, 220, 257
- Stoffels, Hendrickje 116
- Surinam 224
- Swammerdam, Jan 61, 168, 180–81, 183
- technology 167–8, 180–81, 225–7  
 military technology 174–6, 220–21
- Temple, Sir William, *Observations on the United Provinces of the Netherlands* 211
- theatre 142–3, 144, 146–7
- Thirty Years War 35, 219
- toleration 38, 41–2, 77–8, 185–9, 191–2, 231, 233–5, 259–60
- transport 28–30, 100  
*trekvaarten* 28–9, 92, 100
- travellers' tales 145
- Troost, Cornelis 247
- Truce with Spain (1609–21) 82  
 crisis during 33
- tulipmania 66–7
- universities 155–6, 171  
 political theory taught in 206–7
- urbanization 24–6, 44, 47–9  
 urban culture 45
- Utrecht (province) 11, 53
- Utrecht (town)  
 painting in 122, 132, 241
- university 48, 155
- Utrecht, treaty of (1712) 14
- Union of (1579) 11
- Velde, Esaias van de, *Winter Landscape* 23
- Velde, Willem van de, the elder 112, 129–30, 236–7
- Velde, Willem van de, the younger 112, 129–30, 236–7
- Vere, Sir Francis 221
- Vermeer, Johannes 103, 108, 117–18, 126, 195, 238, 239, 241–2, 245, 258  
*Woman at a Virginal* 117
- Vermuyden, Cornelis 226
- verzuiling* 195–6, 249, 252
- Visscher, Anna Roemers 142
- Visscher, Maria Tesselschade 142
- VOC (East India Company) 27, 36–7, 177, 222–4, 248
- Voetius, Gijsbert 190
- Vondel, Joost van den 138, 141, 144, 195, 245, 252
- Vossius, Gerard Johannes 158, 229
- Wagenaar, Jan 247
- warfare 34–6, 218–22  
 Military Revolution 217–18  
 siege warfare 220–21
- West India Company 27–8, 36, 224–5
- Weyden, Rogier van der 250
- William of Orange ('the Silent') 12
- witchcraft  
 fear of witches 99  
 treatment of 55–60

Witt, Cornelis de 212

Witt, Johan de 12, 209, 210, 212,  
214

Witte, Emmanuel de 128

*Interior of the Oude Kerk,*

*Amsterdam, during a Sermon* 130

Zaan, river 17, 25, 51, 227

Zeeland 10, 11, 23, 52

Zeeland Flanders 21

Zoet, Jan 141–2, 194

Zuider Zee 32

Zutphen 217



